Billie Bradley on Lighthouse Island

$3.00

Janet D. Wheeler

Virginia Farrell

The girls came out upon the point where the lighthouse stood.
(See Page 175)

BILLIE BRADLEY ON LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND

OR

THE MYSTERY OF THE WRECK

BY

JANET D. WHEELER

AUTHOR OF "BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER INHERITANCE,"
"BILLIE BRADLEY AT THREE TOWERS HALL," ETC.

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BILLIE BRADLEY SERIES

BY JANET D. WHEELER

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BILLIE BRADLEY AND HER INHERITANCE
OR THE QUEER HOMESTEAD AT CHERRY CORNERS

BILLIE BRADLEY AT THREE TOWERS HALL
OR LEADING A NEEDED REBELLION

BILLIE BRADLEY ON LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND
OR THE MYSTERY OF THE WRECK

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BILLIE BRADLEY ON LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND

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BILLIE BRADLEY ON LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND

CHAPTER I

LOST

SPLASH! went a big drop just on the exact tip of Laura Jordon's pretty, rather upturned nose. She put her hand to the drop to be sure she had not been mistaken, then turned in dismay to her companions.

"Girls," she cried, "it's raining!"

If she had said the world was coming to an end her companions could not have looked more startled. Then Billie Bradley cocked an eye at what she could see of the sky through the trees and held out one hand experimentally.

"You're crazy," she announced, turning an accusing eye upon Laura. "It's no more raining than you are. And, anyway, haven't we troubles enough without your going and making up a new one?"

"M-making up!" Laura stuttered in her indignation. "If you don't believe me, just look at my nose."

"I don't see what your nose has to do with it," Billie began scornfully, but the third of the trio, Violet Farrington, by name, interrupted.

"Laura's right," she cried. "I just felt a great big drop myself. Now, what ever are we going to do?" Vi dropped down in a pathetic little heap on a convenient rock, looking up at her chums wistfully.

Violet Farrington was always a little wistful when in trouble, like a small girl who can never understand why she is being punished. But just now this wistfulness irritated Billie Bradley, who was very much given to quick action herself, and she turned upon Vi rather snappily.

"Well, you needn't just sit there like a ninny," she cried. "Get up and help us think what we can do to get out of this mess."

"Mess is right," said Laura Jordon gloomily.

And it must be admitted that the girls were in rather a trying situation. Their botany teacher at Three Towers Hall, where they were students, had sent them into the woods to gather some rare ferns which they were to use in the botany class the next day.

That was all very well; for if there was anything the girls loved it was a trip into the woods. They had started off in hilarious spirits; and then—the impossible thing had happened.

They had gathered the ferns, turned to go back

to Three Towers, and found, to their absolute dismay, that they did not know which way to go. There was no getting over the fact. They were absolutely and completely lost!

For almost an hour now they had been wandering around and around, getting deeper into the woods every minute, until they had finally begun to feel really frightened. Suppose they couldn't find Three Towers before dusk? Suppose they should be forced to stay in the woods all night? These and a hundred other thoughts had chased themselves through their heads, but they had said nothing of their fears to each other. The girls were thoroughly "game."

But now had come this new complication. It had begun to rain. Hopelessly lost in the woods and a storm coming on! It was a situation to try the patience of a saint. And the girls were not saints. They were just happy, fun-loving, lovable specimens of young American girlhood who could upon occasion show rather alarming flashes of temper.

"I'm not a ninny," Vi protested hotly; but Billie was already started on a different train of thought. She caught Vi's wrist in hers and her eyes were big and round as she looked from her to Laura.

"Suppose," she said in a whisper, "we should meet the Codfish!"

Vi shivered nervously, but it was Laura's turn to be cross.

"Don't be silly," she said. "Don't you know that the Codfish is safe in jail, and has been there for a long time? Now who's making up something to worry about, I'd like to know."

"But thieves do break out of jail," Billie insisted. "And the Codfish is just the kind who would do it."

"Goodness, Billie, what an idea!" said Vi breathlessly. "I never even thought about his escaping. And I suppose," she added, beginning to feel deliciously goose-fleshy, "that we'd be the very first ones he'd go for. Revenge, you know—that's what they are always after in the stories."

"I hate to interrupt you," Laura broke in as sarcastically as she could. "But if you two want to stand there all day talking about the Codfish and revenge, you can, but I'm going to find some way out of this place. Goodness, I felt another drop. And there's another!"

"Well, you needn't count them," Billie remarked briskly, bringing an hysterical giggle from Vi. "Come on, there must be a path of some kind around here."

"I suppose there is, but if we can't find it, it won't do us much good," said Laura, looking about her helplessly.

"Well, we certainly won't find it by standing still," snapped Billie. "Come on. I feel it in my bones that Three Towers is somewhere off in this

direction." And she led the way into the woods, the girls following dispiritedly.

And while the three chums are searching for the path, the opportunity will be taken to recount to new readers some of the adventures and queer experiences the girls had had up to the present time.

In the first book of this series, entitled, "Billie Bradley and Her Inheritance," Billie had been left an old homestead at Cherry Corners in the upper part of New York State. The strange legacy had come to Billie from an eccentric aunt, Beatrice Powerson, for whom Billie had been named. For Billie's real name was not Billie at all, but Beatrice.

It will be remembered that the girls had decided to spend their vacation there, and that the boys, Billie's brother Chetwood, Laura's brother Teddy, and another boy, Ferd Stowing, had joined them there and that queer and exciting adventures had followed.

The most wonderful thing of all had been the finding of the shabby old trunk in the attic whose contents of rare old coins and postage stamps had brought Billie in nearly five thousand dollars in cash. The money had enabled Billie to replace a statue which she had accidentally broken a little while before and had also given her the chance to go to Three Towers Hall, a good boarding school, and Chet the opportunity to go to the Boxton Military

Academy, which was only a little over a mile from Three Towers Hall.

The good times the girls had at school—and some bad times, too—have been told of in the second book of the series, called, "Billie Bradley at Three Towers Hall."

In North Bend, where the girls had always lived, there lived also two other girls, Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks. These girls were sneaks and tattletales of the worst order and were thoroughly disliked by all the girls and boys with whom they had come in contact.

When the chums had heard that Amanda was to accompany them to Three Towers they were absolutely dismayed, for they expected that she would spoil all the fun. Amanda had done her best to live up to the expectations of the girls, but try as she would, she had not been able to spoil entirely the fun. And this very failure had, of course, made her and her chum, Eliza Dilks, furious.

Both Three Towers Hall and Boxton Military Academy had been built on the banks of the beautiful Lake Molata, and the girls and boys had spent many happy hours rowing upon the lake in the fall and skating upon it in the winter.

But the most amazing thing that had happened to them at Three Towers had been the capture of the man the girls called "The Codfish." This rascal had attempted to steal Billie's precious trunk in the

beginning, but Billie and the boys had given chase in an automobile and had succeeded in recovering the trunk. They had also succeeded in getting a good look at the man, whose hair was red, eyes little and close together, mouth wide and loose-lipped. It was this last feature that had given the thief his name with the boys and girls. For the mouth certainly resembled that of a codfish.

Later the "Codfish" had turned up again near Three Towers Hall, had robbed one of the teachers of her purse when she was returning from town, and had later succeeded in making off with a great many valuables from Boxton Military Academy.

The girls never forgot how, with the aid of the boys, they had captured the Codfish and turned him over to the police. Though, as Laura said, the thief had been in jail for some time, the chums had never stopped thinking and wondering about him. But never before had the possibility of his escaping been thought of.

But now, as they made their way through the forest that was growing darker and darker, they could not shake off the thought of him.

They glanced often and uneasily into the shadowy woodland and drew closer together as if for protection. The rain was beginning to come a little faster now, and their clothes felt damp. Even Billie's courage was beginning to fail.

Suddenly Laura stopped stock still and looked at them impatiently.

"There's not a bit of use our going on like this," she said. "For all we know we may be getting farther away from the path every minute."

"And my feet hurt," added Vi pathetically.

Suddenly Billie called to them. She had gone on a little ahead and, peering through the dusk, had seen the outline of something dark, a black smudge against the gray of the woods.

"Girls, come here quick!" she cried, and half-fearing, half-hoping, they knew not what, the others ran to her.

CHAPTER II

THE HUT IN THE WOODS

"WHAT is it?" Laura cried.

For answer Billie pointed through the gloom.

"There! See it?" she cried excitedly. "It's some sort of little house, I guess—a hut or something."

"A house!" cried Laura joyfully. "Glory be, let's go! What's the matter?" she asked, as the other girls hung back.

"Better not be in too much of a hurry," Billie cautioned her. "The place looks as if it were empty; but you never can tell."

"Well, there's something I can tell," Laura retorted impatiently. "And that is, that I'm getting soaking wet." She started on again, but Billie called to her to stop.

"Don't be crazy, Laura," she whispered. "We're all alone in the woods, and it's almost night. How do we know who may be in that shack?"

"Oh, Billie, suppose it were the Codfish!" whispered Vi, and Laura looked disgusted.

"It isn't apt to be the Codfish," returned Billie. "But whoever it is, I think we'd better be careful.

We'll go up to it softly and look about a bit. Please don't any one speak until we're sure it's all right."

The girls were used to obeying Billie, even impulsive Laura, so now they followed softly at her heels, stepping over twigs so as to make no noise.

"Goodness! anybody would think we were thieves ourselves," Laura giggled hysterically, and Billie looked back at her warningly.

It was a strange thing and strangely made, this remote little shelter in the woods. It probably had some sort of framework of wood inside, but all the girls could see from the outside was a rude structure entirely covered by moss and interwoven twigs. In fact, unless one looked closely, one might think that the little hut was no hut at all, but part of the foliage itself.

The girls could find no windows, but as they moved cautiously around the hut Billie came upon a small door. The latter was hardly more than four feet high, and the girls would have to stoop considerably to get through it.

"For goodness sake, open it, Billie," Laura whispered close in her ear. "It's beginning to pour pitchforks and I'm getting soaking wet. I don't care if a hyena lives in there, I'm going in too."

Billie wanted to laugh, but she was too wet and nervous. So she opened the little door cautiously and peered inside.

For a minute she could not tell whether the hut

was empty or not, for it was very very dark. But as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness she felt sure that the place was empty.

"Come on," she called over her shoulder to the girls, her voice still cautiously lowered. "I can't see very well, but I guess there's nobody at home."

The girls had to stoop almost double to enter the tiny door, but once inside they were surprised to find that they could stand upright.

They were in almost entire darkness, the only patch of light coming from the little door that Vi had left open. Suddenly they began to feel panicky again.

"If we could only get a light," whispered Vi.

"Goodness, listen to the child," said Laura scornfully. "She wants all the comforts of home—ouch!" Her toe had come in contact with something hard.

"What's the matter?" cried Billie startled.

"Matter enough," moaned Laura. "I've broken my toe!"

"Oh well, if that's all," said Billie, but Laura began to laugh hysterically.

"Oh yes, that's all," she cried. "I only wish it had happened to you, Billie Bradley!"

If all wishes could be fulfilled as quickly as that of Laura's there would be few unsatisfied people in the world, for before it was out of her mouth Billie uttered a sharp cry of pain, and, lifting a smarting ankle in her hand, began to rub it gently.

"Did you do it, too?" cried Laura joyfully, adding with a good imitation of Billie: "Oh well, if that's all—"

"Oh for goodness sake, keep still," cried Billie, from which it will be seen that Billie was not in the best of tempers. "This place must be full of stuff. Goodness, why didn't we think to bring matches with us!"

"Because we went out to get ferns, not to burn up the woods," said Laura, with a chuckle.

"Goodness!" cried Vi suddenly out of the darkness. "It is—no it isn't—yes it is——"

"For goodness sake, what's the matter with her?" asked Laura, getting hysterical again. "Has trouble turned her head?"

"No. But something's turned yours," Vi's voice came indignantly back at her. "I've found something, I have. But I've a good mind not to tell you what it is."

"Violet, my darling," cried Laura, fondly. "Don't you see me on my knees?"

"Yes," said Vi, and suddenly there was a flare of light in the room that illuminated the faces of the girls and made Billie and Laura jump.

"I see you," said Vi calmly, and stood laughing at them while the flickering match in her hand died down to a little glimmer and went out.

"So that's what you found—matches," cried Billie joyfully, while Laura just kept on gaping. "Oh,

Vi, you're a darling, and I forgive you for scaring us almost to death. Come on, light another one so we can see where we are."

Vi obediently lighted another match, a box of which she had found quite by accident, and the girls looked about them curiously. And as they looked their curiosity and wonder grew. Billie was wild with impatience when the match in Vi's hand flickered and went out again.

"Here, give them to me," she cried. "I thought I saw something. Look out, don't spill them, Vi!"

"I should say not—they're all we have," chimed in Laura.

The match flared up in Billie's hand, and this time it was her turn to make a discovery. The discovery was a pair of thick white candles, each set in a white china dish and pushed to one end of a rudely-made table.

Quick as a flash, Billie put the match to the wick of one candle, and then, with a sigh of excitement, blew out the match that was almost burning her fingers.

"Girls," she cried, looking about her eagerly, "isn't this the queerest, funniest little place you ever saw? And it's so complete."

Excitedly she crossed the little hut, whose floor was nothing but solid, trampled-down earth, and began to examine a rude-looking cot that ran along all one side of the queer little place.

"And here's a pantry!" exclaimed Vi excitedly. "Look, girls, shelves and cans of things and—and—everything!"

The interior of the place was made of rough boards, rudely thrown together as if by an amateur. Why the person who had made the little cabin had not laid boards for his floor, nobody could tell. Perhaps he had run short of lumber or perhaps he preferred the hard earth floor.

As Vi had said, in one corner some boards had been nailed up to form shelves, and there were several tins of canned goods upon the shelves. Quite evidently this must be the queer owner's pantry.

Besides this, the cot, the table, and an oddly-shaped chair, which had evidently been made from an old soap box, made the only furnishings of the place.

"I wonder," said Billie, looking about her while a sort of awe crept into her voice, "what the person is like that lives here. He must be very queer, to say the least."

"Oh," cried Vi, all her old fears coming back again. "Girls, I'd almost forgotten the Codfish. Do you suppose—"

"No, we don't," said Laura shortly, wishing that the very mention of the Codfish would not send the cold chills all over her. "Goodness, just listen to that rain," she added, shivering. "I guess we're in for a night of it."

"But we can't stay *here* all night," said Billie anxiously.

"Suppose the owner should come back," added Vi, her teeth beginning to chatter.

"Well, he could only kill us if he did," said Laura gloomily.

"Besides, there are three of us to his one," said Billie, trying to speak lightly. But Laura spoiled the attempt by adding more gloomily than ever:

"How do we know there's only one of him?"

"Well it doesn't look as if a whole family resided here."

"That's so too—but there may be two, at least."

Again the girls looked around the queer place. They saw a few tools as if somebody had spent time in woodworking. There were shavings and parts of cut tree branches and strips of bark.

"I'll wager he's a queer stick—whoever he is," was Billie's comment.

"And what will he say if he finds us here, prying into his private affairs?" came from Laura, with something of a shiver. "Oh!"

All uttered a little cry as a crash of thunder reached them. Then the rain seemed to come down harder than ever.

"Just listen to that!"

"It's good we are under cover. If we weren't we'd be drowned!"

The rain came in at one corner of the shelter,

forming a pool on the hard floor. But it did not reach the girls, for which they were thankful.

"I wonder how long it will last," sighed Vi presently.

"Maybe all night," returned Billie.

"Oh, do you really think it will last that long?" came pleadingly.

"You know as much about it as I do."

"What will they think of our absence at the Hall?" broke in Laura.

"They may send out a searching party——" began Billie.

"Hush," cried Vi suddenly, and her tone sent the gooseflesh all over them again. "I hear something. Don't you think we'd better put something against the door?"

CHAPTER III

FERNS AND MYSTERY

"TH-THERE's nothing to put against the door," stammered Billie nervously. "I might put out the light though." She started for the candle, but Laura put out a hand and stopped her.

"No," she said. "I'd rather see what's after us, anyway. I hate the dark."

The noise that Vi had heard was a slow measured step that sounded to the girls' overwrought nerves more like the stealthy creeping of an animal than the tread of a man. But whoever or whatever it was, it was coming steadily toward the hut—that much was certain.

The girls drew close together for protection and watched the little door wide-eyed.

"It sounds like a bear," whispered Vi hysterically.

"Silly," Laura hissed back at her. "Don't you know that bears don't grow in this part of the country?"

"But if it was a man," Vi argued, "he wouldn't be walking so slowly—not in this kind of weather."

"Hush," commanded Billie. "He's almost here."

"If it's the Codfish—" Vi was saying desperately, when the little door opened and she clapped her hand to her mouth, choking back the words.

Some one was coming through the door, some one who had to bend so much that for a startled moment the girls were not at all sure but what it was an animal, after all, and not a man that they had to reckon with.

Then the visitor stood up and they saw with real relief that it was a man after all. As a matter of fact, after the first startled minute it was the newcomer who seemed frightened and the girls who tried to make him feel at home.

At first sight of the girls the man staggered backward and came up with a thump against the wall of the hut. From there he regarded them with eyes that fairly bulged from his head.

"Hullo!" he muttered, "who are you?"

The girls stared for a moment, then Laura giggled. Who could be frightened when a person wanted to know who they were?

He was a queer looking man. He was tall, over six feet, and so thin that the skin seemed to be drawn over the bones. His shoulders slumped and his arms hung loosely, whether from weariness or discouragement or laziness, the girls found it impossible to tell.

But it was his eyes that they noticed even in that moment of excitement. They were big, much

too big for his thin face, and so dark that they seemed deep-sunken. And the expression was something that the girls remembered long afterward. It was brooding, haunted, mysterious, with a little touch of wildness that frightened the girls. Yet his mouth was kind, very kind, and looking at it, the girls ceased to be afraid.

"Who *are* you?" the man repeated, and this time Billie found her voice.

"We—we got lost," she said hesitatingly, speaking more to the kind mouth of the man than to the strange, wild eyes. "It began to rain——"

"And we found this little place," Laura caught her up eagerly, "and came inside to keep from drowning to death."

"We hope you don't mind," Vi finished, with her pleading smile which sometimes won more than all Billie's and Laura's courage.

"Mind," the man repeated vaguely, passing a hand across his eyes as if to wake himself up. "Why should I mind? It isn't very often I have company."

The girls thought he spoke bitterly but the next minute he smiled at them.

"I'm sorry I can't ask you to sit down," he said, so embarrassed that Billie took pity on him.

"We don't want to sit down," she said, smiling at him. "We're too nervous. Do you suppose the rain will ever stop?"

The man shook out his clothing and sent a shower of spray all about him. He was soaking, drenching wet, and suddenly, looking at him, Billie had a dreadful thought.

Suppose the man was not quite right in his mind? She had a horror of crazy people. But what sane man would build himself a cabin in the woods like this in the first place, and then go roaming around in the rain without any protection?

A memory of the slow, measured steps they had heard approaching the cabin made her shudder, and instinctively she drew back a little and snuggled her hand into Laura's.

If he was not crazy he was probably a criminal of some sort, and neither thought made Billie feel very comfortable. Three girls alone in the woods with a crazy man or a criminal, with the darkness coming on——

Something of what she was thinking occurred to Laura and Vi also, and they were beginning to look rather pale and scared.

As for the man—he hardly seemed to know what to do next. He took off his dripping coat, threw it in a heap in one corner and turned back uncertainly to the girls.

"No, I don't think it will stop raining for some time," he said, seeming to realize that Billie had asked a question which he had not answered. "And

it is getting pretty dark outside. You say you are lost?"

"Yes," said Billie, wishing she had not told the man that part of their troubles; but then, what else could she do? "We were sent into the woods to find rare ferns——"

"Ferns!" broke in the man, his deep eyes lighting up with sudden interest. "Ah, I could show you where the rarest and most beautiful ferns in the country grow."

"You could!" they cried, growing interested in their turn and coming closer to him.

"Are you—a—naturalist?" asked Vi a little uncertainly, for she knew just enough about naturalists to be sure she was not one.

"I guess you might call me that," said the man. "I've had plenty of time to become one."

Again the girls had that strange feeling of mystery surrounding the man. He walked over to the other end of the room and before the girls' amazed eyes took out what they had thought to be part of the table.

It was a very cleverly hidden receptacle, and as the girls looked down into it they saw that it was half filled with curious little fern baskets.

"I make them," the man explained, as they looked up at him, puzzled. "And then I sell them in the town—sometimes."

His mouth tightened bitterly, and he hastily re-

turned the baskets to their hiding place. Then he turned and faced them abruptly.

"Where do you come from?" he asked almost sharply.

"We come from Three Towers Hall," answered Billie.

"Three Towers!" The man looked very much interested. "Are you—er—teachers there or pupils?"

"Teachers! Hardly," and Billie had to smile. "We are not old enough for that. We are pupils."

"Do you like the place?"

"Very much."

Again there was a pause, and it must be admitted that, for a reason they could not explain, the girls felt far from comfortable. Oh, if only they were back at the boarding school again!

"I don't know a great deal about the school," said the man slowly. "I suppose there are lots of girls there."

"Over a hundred," said Laura, thinking she should say something.

"And quite a few teachers, too?"

"Oh, yes."

Then the man asked quite a lot of other questions and the girls answered him as best they could. The man continued to look at them so queerly that Billie was convinced that there was something wrong with him. But what was it? Oh, if only the storm

would let up, so they could start back to the school!

But even when the rain stopped, how could they get back? They were lost, and at night the way would be even harder to find than in the daytime.

No, they were completely in this man's power. If he put them on the right path to Three Towers, all well and good. If not—— But she refused to think of that.

"I'm sure it isn't raining hard any more," Laura broke in on her thoughts. "Don't you think we could go now?"

"Even if it hasn't stopped raining we don't mind," added Vi eagerly. "We're wet now, and we won't mind being a little bit wetter."

For an answer the man opened the door and crawled out into the open. In a moment he was back with what seemed to the girls the best news they had ever heard.

"The rain is over," he said, "but the foliage is still dripping. If you really don't mind getting wet——"

"Oh, we don't!" they cried, and were starting from the door when Vi sudenly remembered something.

"The ferns!" she cried. "Where are they?"

The girls searched frantically about, knowing that their botany teacher would reprimand them if they did not bring back the ferns, and finally found

them on the floor where somebody had brushed them in the excitement.

Then they crept out through the door, their strange acquaintance lingering behind to put out the light, and found themselves in the cool darkness of the forest.

"Do you suppose he will really take us back?" Vi whispered, close to Billie's ear.

"He'd better!" said Billie, clenching her hands fiercely against her side. "If he doesn't I'll—I'll—murder him!"

"Goodness, don't talk of murder," cried Laura hysterically. "It's an awful word to use in the dark, and everything!"

CHAPTER IV

AT THE SCHOOL AGAIN

"THERE'S only one word worse," said a gloomy voice so close behind them that Vi clapped a hand to her mouth to keep from crying out. "And that," the gloomy voice went on, "is *theft!*"

The girls never afterward knew what kept them from breaking loose and running away. Probably it was because they were paralyzed with fright.

While they had thought the man was still in the hut he had come softly up behind them and had overheard the last, at any rate, of what they had said. Billie, as ususal, was the first to recover herself.

"Will you take us to Three Towers now?" she asked in a voice that she hardly recognized as her own. "Do you know the way?"

"Yes," he answered, adding moodily, as though to himself: "Hugo Billings ought to know the way."

Billie caught at the name quickly, for she had been wondering what this strange person called himself.

"Hugo Billings!" she said eagerly. "Is that your name?"

The man had started on ahead of them through the dark woods, but now he stopped anl looked back and Billie could almost feel his eyes boring into her.

"Did I say so?" he asked sharply, then just as quickly turned away and started on again.

"Goodness, I guess he must be a crazy criminal," thought Billie plaintively, as she and her chums followed their leader, stumbling on over rocks and roots that sometimes bruised their ankles painfully. "I suppose there are some people that are both. Anyway, he must be a criminal, or he wouldn't have been so mad about my knowing his name."

The rest of that strange journey seemed interminable. There were times when the girls were sure the man who called himself Hugo Billings was not taking them toward Three Towers Hall at all. It seemed impossible that they could have wandered such a long way into the woods.

Then suddenly their feet struck a hard-beaten path and they almost cried aloud with relief. For they recognized the path and knew that the open road was not far off. Once on the open road, they could find their way alone.

Abruptly the man in front stopped and turned to face them. Once more the girls' hearts misgave

them. Was he going to make trouble after all? Why didn't he go on?

And then the man spoke.

"I won't go any farther with you," he said, and there was something in his manner of speaking that made them see again in imagination the tired slump of his shoulders, the wild, haunted look in his eyes. "I don't like the road. But you can find it easily from here. Then turn to your right. Three Towers is hardly half a mile up the road. Good night."

He turned with abruptness and started back the way they had come. But impulsively Billie ran to him, calling to him to stop. Yet when he did stop and turned to look at her she had not the slightest idea in the world what she had intended to say—if indeed she had really intended to say anything.

"I—I just wanted to thank you," she stammered, adding, with a swift little feeling of pity for this man who seemed so lonely: "And if there's anything I can ever do to—to—help you——"

"Who told you I needed help?" cried the man, his voice so harsh and threatening that Billie started back, half falling over a root.

"Why—why," faltered Billie, saying almost the first thing that came into her mind. "You looked so—so—sad——"

"Sad," the man repeated bitterly. "Yes, I have enough to make me sad. But help!" he added fiercely. "I don't need help from you or any one."

And without another word he turned and strode off into the darkness.

After that it did not take the girls long to reach the road. They felt, someway, as if they must have dreamed their adventure, it had all been so strange and unreal. And yet they knew they had never been more awake in their lives.

"Please don't talk about it now," begged Vi when Laura would have discussed it. "Let's wait till we get in our dorm with lights and everything. I'm just shivering all over."

For once the others were willing to do as the most timid of the trio wished, and they hurried along in silence till they saw, with hearts full of thankfulness, the lights of Three Towers Hall shine out on the road before them.

"Look, I see the lights!"

"So do I!"

"Thank goodness we haven't much farther to go."

"It's all of a quarter of a mile, Vi."

"Huh! what's a quarter of a mile after such a tramp as we have had?" came from Billie.

"And after such an experience," added Laura.

"We'll certainly have some story to tell."

"I want something to eat first."

"Yes, and dry clothes, too."

"What a queer hut and what a queer man!"

"I've heard of people being lost before," said Billie, as they ran up the steps that led to the hand-

somest door in the world, or at least so they thought it at that moment. "But now I know that what they said about it wasn't half bad enough."

"But not every one finds a hut and a funny man when they get lost," said Vi.

"Well, you needn't be so conceited about it," said Laura, pausing with her hand on the door knob. "The girls probably won't believe us when we tell them."

But Laura was wrong. The girls did really believe the story of Hugo Billings and the hut and became tremendously excited about it. At first they were all for making up an expedition and going to see it—the only drawback being that the chums could not have directed them to it if they would.

And they would not have wished to, anyway. They had rather good reason to believe that Hugo Billings would not want a lot of curious girls spying about his quarters, and, being sorry for him and grateful to him for helping them out of their fix, they absolutely refused to have anything to do with the idea.

They were greeted with open arms on the night of their return. Miss Walters, the much-beloved head of Three Towers Hall, said that she had been just about to send out a searching party for them.

They were late for supper, but that only made their appetites better, and as they were favorites of the cook they were given an extra share of

everything and ate ravenously, impatient of the questions flung at them by the curious girls.

"Thank goodness the Dill Pickles aren't here," Laura said to Billie between mouthfuls of pork chop. "Think of coming home with *our* appetites to the kind of dinners they used to serve us."

"Laura! what a horrible thought," cried Billie, her eyes dancing as she helped herself to two more biscuits. "That's treason."

For the "Dill Pickles" were two elderly spinsters who had been teachers at Three Towers Hall when Billie and her chums had first arrived. Their tartness and strictness and miserliness had made the life of the girls in the school uncomfortable for some time.

And then had come the climax. Miss Walters, having been called away for a week or two, Miss Ada Dill and Miss Cora Dill, disrespectfully dubbed by the girls the twin "Dill Pickles," had things in their own hands and proceeded to make the life of the girls unbearable. They had taken away their liberty, and then had half starved them by cutting down on the meals until finally the girls had rebelled.

With Billie in the lead, they had marched out of Three Towers Hall one day, bag and baggage, to stay in a hotel in the town of Molata until Miss Walters should get back. Miss Walters, coming home unexpectedly, had met the girls in town, ac-

companied them back to Three Towers and, as one of the girls slangily described it, "had given the Dill Pickles all that was coming to them."

In other words, the Misses Dill had been discharged and the girls had come off victorious. Now there were two new teachers in their place who were as different from the Dill Pickles as night is from day. All the girls loved them, especially a Miss Arbuckle who had succeeded Miss Cora Dill in presiding over the dining hall.

So it was to this that Laura had referred when she said, "Thank goodness the Dill Pickles are gone!"

After they had eaten all they could possibly contain, the girls retired to their dormitories, where they changed their clothes, still damp from their adventure, for comfortable, warm night gowns, and held court, all the girls gathering in their dormitory to hear of their adventures, for nearly an hour.

At the end of that time the bell for "lights-out" rang, and the chums found to their surprise that for once they were not sorry. What with the adventure itself and the number of questions they had answered, they were tired out and longed for the comfort of their beds.

"But do you suppose," said Connie Danvers as she rose to go into her dormitory, which was across the hall, "that the man was really a little out of his head?"

"I think he was more than a little," said Laura decidedly, as she dipped her face into a bowl of cold water. "I think he was just plain crazy."

Connie Danvers was a very good friend of the chums, and one of the most popular girls in Three Towers Hall. Just now she looked a little worried.

"Goodness! first we have the Codfish," she said, "and then you girls go and rake up a crazy man. We'll be having a menagerie next!"

CHAPTER V

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

It was the spring of the year, a time when every normal boy and girl becomes restless for new scenes, new adventures. The girls at Three Towers Hall heard the mysterious call and longed through hot days of study to respond to it.

The teachers felt the restlessness in the air and strove to keep the girls to their lessons by making them more interesting. But it was of no use. The girls studied because they had to, not, except in a few scattered cases, because they wanted to.

One of the exceptions to the rule was Caroline Brant, a natural student and a serious girl, who had set herself the rather hopeless task of watching over Billie Bradley and keeping her out of scrapes. For Billie, with her love of adventure and excitement, was forever getting into some sort of scrape.

But these days it would have taken half a dozen Caroline Brants to have kept Billie in the traces. Billie was as wild as an unbroken colt, and just as impatient of control. And Laura and Vi were almost as bad.

There was some excuse for the girls. In the first place, the spring term at Three Towers Hall was drawing to a close, and at the end of the spring term came—freedom.

But the thing that set their blood racing was the thought of what was in store for them after they had gained their freedom. Connie Danvers had given the girls an invitation to visit during their vacation her father's bungalow on Lighthouse Island, a romantic spot off the Maine coast.

The prospect had appealed to the girls even in the dead of winter; but now, with the sweet scent of damp earth and flowering shrubs in the air, they had all they could do to wait at all.

The chums had written to their parents about spending their vacation on the island, and the latter had consented on one condition. And that condition was that the girls should make a good record for themselves at Three Towers Hall. And it is greatly to be feared that it was only this unreasonable—to the girls—condition that kept them at their studies at all.

It was Saturday morning, and Billie, all alone in one of the study halls, was finishing her preparation for Monday's classes. She always got rid of this task on Saturday morning, so as to have her Saturday afternoon and Sunday free. She had never succeeded in winning Laura and Vi over to her method, so that on their part there was usually

a wild scramble to prepare Monday's lessons on Sunday afternoon.

As Billie, books in hand and a satisfied feeling in her heart, came out of the study room, she very nearly ran into Miss Arbuckle. Miss Arbuckle seemed in a great hurry about something, and the tip of her nose and her eyes were red as though she had been crying.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Billie, for Billie was not at all tactful when any one was in trouble. Her impulse was to jump in and help, whether one really wanted her help or not. But everybody that knew Billie forgave her her lack of tact and loved her for the desire to help.

So now Miss Arbuckle, after a moment of hesitation, motioned Billie into the study room, and, crossing over to one of the windows, stood looking out, tapping with her fingers on the sill.

"I've lost something, Billie," she said, without looking around. "It may not seem much to you or to anybody else. But for me—well, I'd rather have lost my right hand."

She looked around then, and Billie saw fresh moisture in her eyes.

"What is it?" she asked gently. "Perhaps I—we can help you find it."

"I wish you could," said Miss Arbuckle, with a little sigh. "But that would be too good to be true. It was only an old family album, Billie. But there

were pictures in it that I prize above everything I own. Oh, well," she gave a little shrug of her shoulders as if to end the matter. "I'll get over it. I've had to get over worse things. But," she smiled and patted Billie's shoulder fondly, "I didn't mean to burden your young shoulders with my troubles. Just run along and forget all about it."

Billie did run along, but she most certainly did not "forget all about it."

"Funny thing to get so upset about," she said to herself, as she slowly climbed the steps to her dormitory. "A picture album! I don't believe I'd ever get my nose and eyes all red over one. Just the same, I'd like to find it and give it back to her. Good Miss Arbuckle! After the Dill Pickles, she seems like an angel."

She was still smiling over the thought of what had happened to the Dill Pickles when she opened the door of the dormitory and came upon her chums.

Laura and Vi and a dark-haired, pink-cheeked girl were sitting on one of the beds in one corner of the dormitory, alternately talking and gazing dreamily out of the window to Lake Molata, where it gleamed and shimmered in the morning sunlight at the end of a sloping lawn.

The dark-haired, pink-cheeked girl was Rose Belser. Rose Belser, being jealous of Billie's immense popularity at Three Towers Hall the term

before, had done her best to get the new girl into trouble, only to be won over to Billie's side in the end. Now she was as firm a friend of Billie's as any girl in Three Towers Hall.

"Well!" was Laura's greeting as Billie sauntered toward them. "Methinks 'tis time you arrived, sweet damsel. Goodness!" she added, dropping her lazy tone and sitting up with a bounce, "I don't see why you have to go and spoil the whole morning with your beastly old studying. Think of the fun we could have had."

"Well, but think of the fun we're going to have this afternoon," Billie flung back airily, stopping before the mirror to tuck some wisps of hair into place, while the girls, even Rose, who was as pretty as a picture herself, watched her admiringly. "It's almost lunch time."

"You don't have to tell us that," said Vi in an aggrieved tone. "Haven't we been waiting for you all morning?"

"Oh, come on," said Billie, as the lunch gong sounded invitingly through the hall. "Maybe when you've had something to eat you'll feel better. Feed the beast——"

"Say, she's calling us names again," cried Laura, making a dive for Billie. But Billie was already flying down the steps two at a time, and when Billie once got a head start, no one, at least no

one in Three Towers Hall, had a chance of catching up with her.

It seemed to be Billie's day for bumping into people—for at the foot of the stairs she had to clutch the banister to keep from colliding with Miss Walters, the beautiful and much loved head of the school.

At Billie's sudden appearance the latter seemed inclined to be alarmed, then her eyes twinkled, and as she looked at Billie she chuckled, yes, actually chuckled.

"Beatrice Bradley," she said, with a shake of her head as she passed on, "I've done my best with you, but it's of no use. You're utterly incorrigible."

Billie looked thoughtful as she seated herself at the table, and a moment later, under cover of the general conversation, she leaned over and whispered to Laura.

"Miss Walters said something funny to me," she confided. "I'm not quite sure yet whether she was calling me names or not."

"What did she say?" asked Laura, looking interested.

"She said I was incorrigible," Billie whispered back.

"Incorrigible," there was a frown on Laura's forehead, then it suddenly cleared and she smiled beamingly.

"Why yes, don't you remember?" she said. "We

had it in English class the other day. Incorrigible means wicked, you know—bad. You can't reform 'em, you know—incorrigibles." The last word was mumbled through a mouthful of soup.

"Can't reform 'em!" Billie repeated in dismay. "Goodness, do you suppose that's what she really thinks of me?"

"I don't see why she shouldn't," Laura said wickedly, and Billie would surely have thrown something at her if Miss Arbuckle's eye had not happened at that moment to turn in her direction.

Miss Arbuckle's eye brought to Billie's mind the teacher's trouble, and she confided it in a low tone to Laura.

"Humph," commented Laura, her mind only on the fun they were going to have that afternoon, "I'm sorry, of course, but I don't believe any old album would make me shed tears."

"Don't be so sure of that, Laura."

"What? Cry over an old album?" and Laura looked her astonishment.

"But suppose the album had in it the pictures of those you loved very dearly—pictures perhaps of those that were dead and gone and pictures that you couldn't replace?"

"Oh, well—I suppose that would be different. Did she say anything about the people?"

"She didn't go into details, but she said they were pictures she prized above anything."

"Oh, perhaps then that would make a difference."

"I hope she gets the album back," said Billie seriously.

Then Laura promptly forgot all about both Miss Arbuckle and the album.

A little while later the girls swung joyfully out upon the road, bound for town and shopping and perhaps some ice cream and—oh, just a jolly good time of the kind girls know so well how to have, especially in the spring of the year.

CHAPTER VI

FOUND—ONE ALBUM

"I'm sorry Connie couldn't come along," said Laura, drinking in deep breaths of the fragrant air.

"Yes," said Billie, her eyes twinkling. "She said she wished she hadn't been born with a conscience."

"A conscience," said Vi innocently. "Why?"

"Because," said Billie, her cheeks aglow with the heat and exercise, her brown hair clinging in little damp ringlets to her forehead, and her eyes bright with health and the love of life, "then she could have had a good time to-day instead of staying at home in a stuffy room and writing a cartload of letters. She says if she doesn't write them, she'll never dare face her friends when she gets home."

"She's a darling," said Laura, executing a little skip in the road that sent the dust flying all about them. "Just think—if we hadn't met her we wouldn't be looking forward to Lighthouse Island and a dear old uncle who owns the light——"

"Anybody would think he was your uncle," said Vi.

"Well, he might just as well be," Laura retorted.

"Connie says that he adopts all the boys and girls about the place."

"And that they adopt him," Billie added, with a nod. "He must be a darling. I'm just crazy to see him."

Connie Danver's Uncle Tom attended the lighthouse, and, living there all the year around, had become as much of a fixture as the island itself. Connie loved this uncle of hers, and had told the girls enough about him to rouse their curiosity and make them very eager to meet him.

The girls walked on in silence for a little way and then, as they came to a path that led into the woods, Laura stopped suddenly and said in a dramatic voice:

"Do you realize where we are, my friends? Do you, by any chance, remember a tall, thin, wild-eyed man?"

Did they remember? In a flash they were back again in a queer little hut in the woods, where a tall man stood and stared at them with strange eyes.

Laura and Vi started to go on, but Billie stood staring at the path with fascinated eyes.

"I wonder why," she said, as she turned slowly away in response to the urging of the girls, "nothing ever seems the same in the sunlight. The other night when we were running along that path we were scared to death, and now——"

"You sound as if you'd like to stay scared to

death," said Laura impatiently, for Laura had not Billie's imagination.

"I guess I don't like to be scared any more than any one else," Billie retorted. "But I *would* like to see that man again. I wonder——" she paused and Vi prompted her.

"Wonder what?" she asked.

"Why," said Billie, a thoughtful little crease on her forehead, "I was just wondering if we could find the little hut again if we tried."

"Of course we couldn't!" Laura was very decided about it. "We were lost, weren't we? And when the man showed us the way back it was dark——"

"The only way I can see," said Vi, who often had rather funny ideas, "would be to have one of us stand in the road and hold on to strings tied to the other two so that if they got lost——"

"The one in the road could haul 'em back," said Laura sarcastically. "That's a wonderful idea, Vi."

"Well, I *would* like to see that man again," sighed Billie. "He seemed so sad. I'm sure he was in trouble, and I'd so like to help him."

"Yes and when you offered you nearly got your head bit off," observed Laura.

Billie's eyes twinkled.

"That's what Daddy says always happens to people who try to help," she said. "I feel awfully

sorry for him, just the same," she finished decidedly.

Then Laura did a surprising thing. She put an arm about Billie's shoulders and hugged her fondly.

"Billie Bradley," she said sadly, "I do believe you would feel sorry for a snake that bit you, just because it was only a snake."

"Perhaps that's why she loves *you,*" said Vi innocently, and scored a point. Laura looked as if she wanted to be mad for a minute, but she was not. She only laughed with the girls.

They had as good a time as they had expected to have in town that afternoon—and that is saying something.

First they went shopping. Laura had need of a ribbon girdle. Although they all knew that a blue one would be bought in the end, as blue was the color that would go best with the dress with which the girdle was to be worn, the merits and beauties of a green one and a lavender one were discussed and comparisons made with the blue one over and over, all from very love of the indecision and, more truly, the joy that looking at the dainty, pretty colors gave them.

"Well, I think this is the very best of all, Laura," said Billie finally, picking up the pretty blue girdle with its indistinct pattern of lighter blue and white.

"Yes, it is a beauty," replied Laura. "I'll take that one," she went on to the clerk.

After that came numerous smaller purchases un-

til, as Vi said dolefully, all their money was gone except enough to buy several plates of ice cream apiece.

They were standing just outside the store where their last purchases had been made when Billie, looking down the street, gave a cry of delight.

"Look who's coming!" she exclaimed.

"It's the boys!" cried Vi. "Mercy, girls, we might just as well have spent the rest of our money, the boys will treat us to the ice cream."

"Goodness, Vi! do you want to spend your money whether you get anything you really need or wish for or not?" inquired Billie, with a little gasp.

"What in the world is money for if not to spend?" asked Vi, making big and innocent eyes at Billie.

Just then the boys came within speaking distance.

"Well, this is what I call luck!" exclaimed Ferd Stowing.

"Yes," added Teddy, putting his hand in his pocket, "just hear the money jingle. A nice big check from Dad in just appreciation of his absent son! What do you girls say to an ice-cream spree? No less than three apiece, with all this unwonted wealth."

"Ice cream? I should say!" was Billie's somewhat slangy acceptance.

"Teddy," suddenly asked Laura, "how does it come that you have any money left from Dad's check?"

"Check came just as we left the Academy, Captain Shelling cashed it for me, and we have just reached town."

"Oh! Well, maybe I'll find one, too, when we reach Three Towers."

"So that's it, is it, sister mine? Envy!"

After that they ate ice cream to repletion, and at last the girls decided that there was nothing much left to do but to go back to the school.

It was just as well that they had made this decision, for the sun was beginning to sink in the west and the supper hour at Three Towers Hall was rather early. As they started toward home, having said good-bye to the boys, the girls quickened their pace.

It was not till they were nearing the path which, to Billie at least, had been surrounded by a mysterious halo since the adventure of the other night that the girls slowed up. Then it was Billie who did the slowing up.

"Girls," she said in a hushed voice, "I suppose you'll laugh at me, but I'd just love to follow that path into the woods a little way. You don't need to come if you don't want to. You can wait for me here in the road."

"Oh, no," said Laura, with a little sigh of resignation. "If you are going to be crazy we might as well be crazy with you. Come on, Vi, if we

didn't go along, she would probably get lost all over again—just for the fun of it."

Billie made a little face at them and plunged into the woods. Laura followed, and after a minute's hesitation Vi trailed at Laura's heels.

They were so used to Billie's sudden impulses that they had stopped protesting and merely went along with her, which, as Billie herself had often pointed out, saved a great deal of argument.

They might have saved themselves all worry on Billie's account this time, though, for she had not the slightest intention of getting lost again—once was enough.

She went only as far as the end of the path, and when the other girls reached her she was peering off into the forest as if she hoped to see the mysterious hut—although she knew as well as Laura and Vi that they had walked some distance through the woods the other night before they had finally reached the path.

"Well, are you satisfied?" Laura asked, with a patient sigh. "If you don't mind my saying it, I'm getting hungry."

"Goodness! after all that ice cream?" cried Billie, adding with a little chuckle: "You're luckier than I am, Laura. I feel as if I shouldn't want anything to eat for a thousand years."

She was just turning reluctantly to follow her chums back along the path when a dark, bulky-

looking object lying in a clump of bushes near by caught her eye and she went over to examine it.

"Now what in the world——" Laura was beginning despairingly when suddenly Billie gave a queer little cry.

"Come here quick, girls!" she cried, reaching down to pick up the bulky object which had caught her attention. "I do believe—yes, it is—it must be——"

"Well, say it!" the others cried, peering impatiently over her shoulder.

"Miss Arbuckle's album," finished Billie.

CHAPTER VII

STRANGE ACTIONS

INSTEAD of seeming excited, Laura and Vi stared. Vi had not even heard that Miss Arbuckle had lost an album, and Laura just dimly remembered Billie's having said something about it.

But Billie's eyes were shining, and she was all eagerness as she picked the old-fashioned volume up and began turning over the pages. She was thinking of poor Miss Arbuckle's red nose and eyes of that morning and of how different the teacher's face would look when she, Billie, returned the album.

"Oh, I'm so glad," she said. "I felt awfully sorry for Miss Arbuckle this morning."

"Well, I wish I knew what you were talking about," said Vi plaintively, and Billie briefly told of her meeting with Miss Arbuckle in the morning and of the teacher's grief at losing her precious album.

"Humph! I don't see anything very precious about it," sniffed Laura. "Look—the corners are all worn through."

"Silly, it doesn't make any difference how old it is," said Vi as they started back along the path, Billie holding on tight to the book. "It may have pictures in it she wants to save. It may be—what is it they call 'em?—an heirloom or something. And Mother says heirlooms are precious."

"Well, I know one that isn't," said Laura, with a little grimace. "Mother has a wreath made out of hair of different members of the family. She says it's precious, too; but I notice she keeps it in the darkest corner of the attic."

"Well, this isn't a hair wreath, it's an album," Billie pointed out. "And I don't blame Miss Arbuckle for not wanting to lose an album with family pictures in it."

"But how did she come to lose it there?" asked Laura, as the road could be seen dimly through the trees. "The woods seem a funny place. Girls," and Laura's eyes began to shine excitedly, "it's a mystery!"

"Oh, dear," sighed Vi plaintively, "there she goes again. Everything has to be a mystery, whether it is or not."

"But it is, isn't it?" insisted Laura, turning to Billie for support. "A lady says she has lost an album. In a little while we find that same album——"

"I suppose it's the same," put in Billie, looking at the album as if it had not occurred to her before

that this might not be Miss Arbuckle's album, after all.

"Of course it is, silly," Laura went on impatiently. "It isn't likely that two people would be foolish enough to lose albums on the same day. If it had been a stick pin now, or a purse——"

"Yes, yes, go on," Billie interrupted. "You were talking about mysteries."

"Well, it is, isn't it?" demanded Laura, becoming so excited she could not talk straight. "What was Miss Arbuckle doing in the woods with her album, in the first place?"

"She might have been looking at it," suggested Vi mildly.

Billie giggled at the look Laura gave Vi.

"Yes. But may I ask," said Laura, trying to appear very dignified, "why, if she only wanted to *look* at the pictures, she couldn't do it some place else—in her room, for instance?"

"Goodness, I'm not a detective," said poor Vi. "If you want to ask any questions go and ask Miss Arbuckle. I didn't lose the old album."

Laura gave a sigh of exasperation.

"A person might as well try to talk to a pair of wooden Indians," she cried, then turned appealingly to Billie. "Don't you think there's something mysterious about it, Billie?"

"Why, it does seem kind of queer," Billie admitted, adding quickly as Laura was about to turn

upon Vi with a whoop of triumph. "But I don't think it's very mysterious. Probably Miss Arbuckle just wanted to be alone or something, and so she brought the album out into the woods to look it over by herself. I like to do it sometimes myself—with a book I mean. Just sneak off where nobody can find me and read and read until I get so tired I fall asleep."

"Well, but you can't look at pictures in a shabby old album until you feel so tired you fall asleep," grumbled Laura, feeling like a cat that has just had a saucer of rich cream snatched from under its nose. "You girls wouldn't know a mystery if you fell over it."

"Maybe not," admitted Billie good-naturedly, her face brightening as she added, contentedly: "But I do know one thing, and that is that Miss Arbuckle is going to be very glad when she sees this old album again!"

And she was right. When they reached Three Towers Hall Laura and Vi went upstairs to the dormitory to wash up and get ready for supper while Billie stopped at Miss Arbuckle's door, eager to tell her the good news at once.

She rapped gently, and, receiving no reply, softly pushed the door open. Miss Arbuckle was standing by the window looking out, and somehow Billie knew, even before the teacher turned around, that she had been crying again.

The tired droop of the shoulders, the air of discouragement—suddenly there flashed across Billie's mind a different picture, the picture of a tall lank man with stooped shoulders and dark, deep-set eyes, looking at her strangely.

A puzzled little line formed itself across her forehead. Why, she thought, had Miss Arbuckle made her think of the man who called himself Hugo Billings and who lived in a hut in the woods?

Perhaps because they both seemed so very sad. Yes, that must be it. Then her face brightened as she felt the bulky album under her arm. Here was something that would make Miss Arbuckle smile, at least.

Billie spoke softly and was taken aback at the suddenness with which Miss Arbuckle turned upon her, regarding her with startled eyes.

For a moment teacher and pupil regarded each other. Then slowly a pitiful, crooked smile twitched Miss Arbuckle's lips and her hand reached out gropingly for the back of a chair.

"Oh, it's—it's you," she stammered, adding with an apologetic smile that made her look more natural: "I'm a little nervous to-day—a little upset. What is it, Billie? Why didn't you knock?" The last words were said in Miss Arbuckle's calm, slightly dry voice, and Billie began to feel more natural herself. She had been frightened when Miss Arbuckle swung around upon her.

"I did," she answered. "Knock, I mean. But you didn't hear me. I found something of yours, Miss Arbuckle." Her eyes fell to the volume she still carried under her arm, and Miss Arbuckle, following the direction of her gaze, recognized her album.

She gave a little choked cry, and her face grew so white that Billie ran to her, fearing she hardly knew what. But she had no need to worry, for although fear sometimes kills, joy never does, and in a minute Miss Arbuckle's eager hands were clutching the volume, her fingers trembling as they rapidly turned over the leaves.

"Yes, here they are, here they are," she cried suddenly, and Billie, peeping over her shoulder, looked down at the pictured faces of three of the most beautiful children she had ever seen. "My darlings, my darlings," Miss Arbuckle was saying over and over again. Then suddenly her head dropped to the open page and her shoulders shook with the sobs that tore themselves from her.

Billie turned away and tiptoed across the room, her own eyes wet, but she stopped with her hand on the door.

"My little children!" Miss Arbuckle cried out sobbingly. "My precious little babies! I couldn't lose your pictures after losing you. They were all I had left of you, and I couldn't lose them, I couldn't—I couldn't——"

Billie opened the door, and, stepping out into the hall, closed it softly after her. She brushed her hand across her eyes, for there were tears in them, and her feet felt shaky as she started up the stairs.

"Well, I—I never!" she told herself unsteadily. "First she nearly scares me to death. And then she cries and talks about her children, and says she's lost them. Goodness, I shouldn't wonder but that Laura is right after all. There certainly is something mighty strange about it."

And when, a few minutes later, she told the story to her chums they agreed with her, even Vi.

"Why, I never heard of such a thing," said the latter, looking interested. "You say she seemed frightened when you went in, Billie?"

"Terribly," answered Billie. "It seemed as if she might faint or something."

"And the children," Laura mused delightedly aloud. "I'm going to find out who those children are and why they are lost if I die doing it."

"Now look who she thinks she is," jeered Vi.

"Who?" asked Laura with interest.

"The Great Lady Detective," said Vi, and Laura's chest, if one takes Billie's word for it, swelled to about three times its natural size.

"That's all right," said Laura, in response to the girls' gibes. "I'll get in some clever work, with nothing but a silly old photograph album as a clue,

or a motive—oh, well, I don't know just what the album is yet, but an album is worse than commonplace, it is plumb foolish as a center around which to work. Oh, ho! Great Lady Detective! Solves most marvelous and intricate mystery with only the slightest of clues, an old photograph album, to point the way! Oh, ho!"

CHAPTER VIII

AN INVITATION

THE girls could never have told exactly why, but they kept the mystery of the album and Miss Arbuckle's strange actions to themselves, with one exception.

They did confide their secret to fluffy-haired, blue-eyed Connie Danvers. For they had long ago adopted Connie as one of themselves and were beginning to feel that they had known her all their lives.

Connie had been interested enough in their story to satisfy even the chums and had urged Billie to describe the pretty children in the album over whom Miss Arbuckle had cried.

Billie tried, but, having seen the pictures but once, it was hardly to be expected that she would be able to give the girls a very clear description of them.

It was good enough to satisfy Connie, however, who, in her enthusiasm, went so far as to suggest that they form a Detective Club.

This the girls might have done if it had not been for an interruption in the form of Chet Bradley,

Teddy Jordon and their chum, Ferd Stowing.

The boys had entered Boxton Military Academy at the time the girls had entered Three Towers Hall, and the boys were as enthusiastic about their academy as the girls were about their beloved school.

The head of Boxton Military Academy was Captain Shelling, a splendid example of army officer whom all the students loved and admired. They did not know it, but there was not one of the boys in the school who did not hope that some day he might be like Captain Shelling.

Now, as the spring term was drawing to a close, there were great preparations being made at the Academy for the annual parade of cadets.

The girls knew that visitors were allowed, and they were beginning to wonder a little uneasily whether they were to be invited or not when one afternoon the boys turned up and settled the question for them very satisfactorily.

It was Saturday afternoon, just a week after the finding of Miss Arbuckle's album, and the girls, Laura, Billie, Vi and Connie, were wandering arm in arm about the beautiful campus of Three Towers Hall when a familiar hail came to them from the direction of the road.

"It's Chet," said Billie.

"No, it isn't—it's Teddy," contradicted Laura.

"It's both of 'em," added Vi.

"No, you are both wrong," said Connie, gazing eagerly through the trees. "Here they come, girls. Look, there are four of them."

"Yes, there are four of them," mocked Laura, mischievous eyes on Connie's reddening face. "The third is Ferd Stowing, of course. And I wonder, oh, I wonder, who the fourth can be!"

"Don't be so silly! I think you're horrid!" cried Connie, which only made Laura chuckle the more.

For while they had been at the Academy, the boys had made a friend. His name was Paul Martinson, and he was tall and strongly built and—yes, even Billie had to admit it—almost as good looking as Teddy!

If Billie said that about any one it was pretty sure to be true. For Billie and Teddy Jordon had been chums and playmates since they could remember, and Billie had always been sure that Teddy must be the very best looking boy in the world, not even excepting her brother Chet, of whom she was very fond.

But Billie was not the only one who had found Paul Martinson good looking. Connie had liked him, and had said innocently one day after the boys had gone that Paul Martinson looked like the hero in a story book she was reading.

The girls had giggled, and since then Laura had made poor Connie's life miserable—or so Connie

declared. She could not have forgotten Paul Martinson, even if she had wanted to.

As for Paul Martinson, he had shown a liking for Billie that somehow made Teddy uncomfortable. Teddy was very much surprised to find how uncomfortable it did make him. Billie was a "good little chum and all that, but that didn't say that another fellow couldn't speak to her." But just the same he had acted so queerly two or three times lately that Billie had bothered him exceedingly asking him what the matter with him was and telling him to "cheer up, it wasn't somebody's funeral, you know." Billie had been puzzled over his answer to that. He had muttered something about "it's not anybody's funeral yet, maybe, but everything had to start sometime."

When Billie had innocently told Laura about it she was still more puzzled at the way Laura had acted. Instead of being sensible, she had suddenly buried her face in the pillow—they had been sitting on Billie's bed, exchanging confidences—and fairly shook with laughter.

"Well, what in the world——" Billie had begun rather resentfully, when Laura had interrupted her with an hysterical: "For goodness sake, Billie, I never thought you could be so dense. But you are. You're absolutely crazy, and so is Teddy, and so is everybody!"

And after that Billie never confided any of Teddy's sayings to Laura again.

On this particular afternoon it did not take the girls long to find out that the boys had some good news to tell them.

"Come on down to the dock," Teddy said, taking hold of Billie's arm and urging her down toward the lake as he spoke. "Maybe we can find some canoes and rowboats that aren't working."

But when they reached the dock there was never a craft of any kind to be seen except those far out upon the glistening water of the lake. Of course the beautiful weather was responsible for this, for all the girls who had not lessons to do or errands in town had made a bee line—as Ferd Stowing expressed it—straight down to the lake.

"Oh, well, this will do," said Teddy, sitting down on the edge of the little dock so that his feet could hang over and reaching up a hand for Billie. "Come along, everybody. We can look at the water, anyway."

The girls and boys scrambled down obediently and there was great excitement when Connie's foot slipped and she very nearly tumbled into the lake. Paul Martinson steadied her, and she thanked him with a little blush that made Laura look at her wickedly.

"How beautifully pink your complexion is in the warm weather, Connie," she said innocently, add-

ing with a little look that made Connie want to shake her: "It can't be anything *but* the heat, can it? You haven't a fever, or something?"

"No. But you'll have something beside a fever," threatened Connie, "if you don't keep still."

"Say, stop your rowing, girls, and listen to me," Teddy interrupted, picking a pebble from the dock and throwing it far out into the gleaming water, where it dropped with a little splash. "Our famous parade of cadets comes off next week. You're going to be on deck, aren't you?"

"We might," said Billie, with a demure little glance at him, "if somebody would only ask us!"

CHAPTER IX

'AMANDA AGAIN

THE great day came at last and found the girls in a fever of mingled excitement and fear. Excitement because of the great advent; fear, because the sky had been overcast since early morning and it looked as if the whole thing might have to be postponed on account of rain.

"And if there is anything I hate," complained Laura, moving restlessly from her mirror over to the window and back again, "it's to be all prepared for a thing and then have it spoiled at the last minute by rain."

"Well, I guess you don't hate it any more than the rest of us," said Billie, her thoughts on the pretty pink flowered dress she had decided to wear to the parade. It was not only a pretty dress, but was very becoming. Both Teddy and Chet had told her so. "And the boys would be terribly disappointed," she added.

"I wonder," Vi was sitting on the bed, sewing a hook and eye on the dress she had intended to wear, "if Amanda Peabody and The Shadow will be there."

Laura turned abruptly from the window and regarded her with a reproachful stare.

"Now I know you're a joy killer," she said; "for if Amanda Peabody and The Shadow (the name the girls had given Eliza Dilks because she always followed Amanda as closely as a shadow does) succeeded in getting themselves invited to any sort of affair where we girls were to be, they would be sure to do something annoying."

"They are going to be there, just the same," said Billie, and the two girls looked at her in surprise. "They told me so," she said, in answer to the unspoken question. "They have some sort of relatives among the boys at the Academy, and these relatives didn't have sense enough not to invite them."

"Humph!" grunted Laura, "Amanda probably hinted around till the boys couldn't help inviting her. Look—oh, look!" she cried in such a different tone that the girls stared at her. "The sun!" she said. "Oh, it's going to clear up, it's going to clear up!"

"Well, you needn't step in my blue silk for all that," complained Vi, as Laura caught an exultant heel in the latter's dress.

"Don't be grouchy, darling," said Laura, all good-nature again now that the sun had appeared. "My, but we're going to have a good time!"

"I'll say we are," sang out Billie, as she gayly

spread out the pink flowered dress upon the bed. "And we're not going to let anybody spoil it either —even Eliza Dilks and Amanda Peabody."

The girls had an hour in which to get ready, and they were ready and waiting before half that time was up. The Three Towers Hall carryall was to call for the girls who had been lucky enough to receive invitations from the cadets of Boxton Military Academy, and as the girls, looking like gay-colored butterflies in their summery dresses, gathered on the steps of the school there were so many of them that it began to look as if the carryall would have to make two trips.

"If we have to go in sections I wonder whether we'll be in the first or second," Vi was saying when Billie grasped her arm.

"Look," she cried, merriment in her eyes and in her voice. "Here come Amanda and Eliza. Did you ever see anything so funny—and awful—in your life?"

For Amanda and her chum were dressed in their Sunday best—poplin dresses with a huge, gorgeous flower design that made the pretty, delicate-colored dresses of the other girls look pale and washed-out by comparison. If Amanda's and Eliza's desire was to be the most noticeable and talked-of girls on the parade, they were certainly going to succeed. The talk had begun already!

However, the arrival of the carryall cut short the

girls' amusement, and there was great excitement and noise and giggling as the girls—all who could get in, that is—clambered in.

There were about a dozen left over, and these the driver promised to come back and pick up "in a jiffy."

"I'm feeling awfully nervous," Laura confided to Billie. "I never expected to be nervous; did you?"

"Yes, I did," Billie answered truthfully. "I've been nervous ever since the boys invited us. It's because it's all so new, I guess. We've never been to anything like this before."

"I'm frightened to death when I think of meeting Captain Shelling," Connie leaned across Vi to say. "From what the boys say about him he must be simply won-derful."

"Paul had better look out," said Laura slyly, and Connie drew back sharply.

"I think you're mean to tease Connie so," spoke up Vi. "She doesn't like Paul Martinson any better than the rest of us do, and you know it."

"Oh, I do, do I——" began Laura, but Billie broke in hastily.

"Girls," she cried, "stop your quarreling. Look! We're at the Academy. And—look—look——" Words failed her, and she just stared wonderingly at the sight that met her eyes. It was true, none of them had ever seen anything like it before.

Booths of all sorts and colors were distributed over the parade ground, leaving free only the part where the cadets were to march. Girls in bright-colored dresses and boys in trig uniforms were already walking about making brilliant patches of color against the green of the parade ground.

There were some older people, too, fathers and mothers of the boys, but the groups were mostly made up of young people, gay and excited with the exhilaration of the moment.

There were girls and matrons in the costume of French peasants wandering in and out among the visitors, carrying little baskets filled with ribbon-tied packages. Some of these packages contained candy, some just little foolish things to make the young folks laugh, favors to take away with them and remember the day by.

As the carryall stopped and one after another the girls jumped to the ground they were surprised to find that their nervousness, instead of growing less, was getting worse and worse all the time.

They were standing on the edge of things, wondering just what to do next and wishing some one would meet them when some one did just that very thing.

Paul Martinson spied the carryall from Three Towers Hall, called to a couple of his friends, and came running down toward the girls, his handsome face alight with pleasure.

"Hello!" he said. "We thought you were never coming. Say, you make all the other girls look like nothing at all." He was supposed to be talking to them all, but he was looking straight at Billie.

But although the other girls noticed it, Billie did not. She was looking beyond Paul to where three boys, Teddy in the lead, were bearing down upon them.

After that the boys soon made their guests feel as if they had never been nervous in their lives, and they entered into the fun with all their hearts.

The parade of cadets was the most wonderful part of it all, of course, and the girls stood through it, their hearts beating wildly, a delicious wave of patriotism thrilling to their finger tips. And when it was over the girls looked at Teddy and Chet and Ferd and Paul with a new respect that the boys liked but did not understand at all.

Several times during the afternoon they came across Eliza and Amanda and their escorts—who did not look like bad boys at all. But only once did the girls try to shove to the front.

It was when Teddy and Paul had taken Billie and Connie over to the ice cream booth for refreshments, the other boys and girls having wandered off somewhere by themselves.

Billie was standing up near the counter when Eliza Dilks deliberately elbowed her way in ahead of her.

Billie began to feel herself getting angry, but before she could say anything, Teddy spoke over her shoulder.

"Please serve us next," he said to the pleasant-faced matron who had charge of this part of the refreshments. "Some of these others just came in and belong at the end of the line."

"Yes, I noticed you were here first," the woman answered, and handed Billie her ice cream over Eliza's head while Eliza, with a glance at Billie that should have killed her on the spot, turned sullenly and walked away.

"Teddy, you're a wonder," murmured Billie under her breath. "I couldn't have done it like that myself."

After this encounter Billie and her party wandered over to the dancing pavilion on the outside of which they met Laura and Vi and their escorts for the afternoon.

"Isn't this the dandiest band in the world?" sighed Billie in supreme content. "Such music would make—would make even Amanda Peabody dance well."

"Oh, come, Billie, that's too much!" laughed Teddy, swinging her on to the floor and giving her what she called a heavenly dance.

And indeed what could have been better fun than this dance on a smooth floor so large that it did not seem crowded, to the best of music, with a partner

who was a perfect dancer, and—though Billie did not say this to herself—by a girl who was herself as light and graceful a dancer as was on the floor?

All things must end, even the most perfect day in a lifetime, as Vi called it, and finally the girls had been tucked into the carryall and were once more back at Three Towers Hall, ready, with a new day, to take up the routine of school life once more.

CHAPTER X

TWO OF A KIND

SEVERAL days had passed, and the girls were at last actually looking forward to the end of the school term and to the Danvers bungalow on Lighthouse Island!

The graduates were running around excitedly in the last preparations for graduation with the strange look on their young faces that most graduates have, half exultation at the thought of their success, half grief at being forced to leave the school, the friends they had made, the scenes they had loved.

Just the day before the one set for graduation Teddy ran over to tell the girls some wonderful news. He was able to see only Billie, for the other girls had been busy with their lessons. But that was very satisfactory to Teddy.

As soon as the lunch gong rang Billie had called the girls together and eagerly she told them what Teddy had told her.

"Paul Martinson's father gave him a beautiful big motor boat—a cruising motor boat," she told

the girls. "Paul got the highest average in his class this term, you know, and his father has given him the motor boat as a sort of prize."

"A motor boat!" cried Vi, breathlessly. "That's some prize."

"But, Billie, what's that got to do with us?" asked Laura practically.

"It hasn't much to do with us," said Billie, her face pink with excitement. "But it has a great deal to do with the boys. Paul Martinson has asked Chet and Ferd and Teddy to go with him and his father on a cruise this summer."

She paused from lack of breath, and the girls looked at her in amazement.

"My, that's wonderful for them," said Laura after a minute, adding a little regretfully: "But I suppose it means that we won't see very much of the boys this summer."

"Oh, but that's just what it doesn't mean!" Billie interrupted eagerly. "Don't you see? Why, Teddy said that it would be the easiest thing in the world to stop off at Lighthouse Island some time and see us girls."

The girls agreed that it was all perfectly wonderful, that everything was working just for them, and that this couldn't possibly help being the most wonderful summer they had ever spent.

They did not have as much time to think about it as they would have liked, however, in the busy

excited hours that followed. Right after the graduating exercises all the girls were to start for their homes, except the few who expected to spend the summer at Three Towers Hall.

Many of the relatives and friends of the graduates were expected, so that preparations had to be made for them also. The graduating exercises were to be held earlier at Boxton Military Academy than at Three Towers Hall, so that the three North Bend boys hoped to get away in time to attend—not the exercises themselves—but the singing on the steps of Three Towers Hall by all the students of the school, which was one of the most important parts of the ceremony.

Then, of course, the boys would be able to go with the girls all the way to North Bend.

The exercises that had been looked forward to for so long and that had taken weeks of preparation to perfect, were over at last. The graduates realized with a sinking of the heart that they were no longer students of Three Towers Hall.

There was still the mass singing on the steps, to be sure, but that was simply the last barrier to be crossed before they stepped out on the open road, leaving Three Towers Hall with its pleasing associations behind them forever.

As the girls, in their simple white dresses, gathered on the steps of the school with the visitors, fathers and mothers and boys in uniform, scattered

about on the campus below them, and began to sing in their clear, girlish voices, there was hardly a dry eye anywhere.

At last it was over, and the girls rushed upstairs again to change their dresses for traveling clothes and say a last good-bye to their teachers and to Miss Walters.

As Billie was hurrying down the corridor, bag in hand, toward the front door a hand was laid gently on her arm, and, turning, she found herself face to face with Miss Arbuckle.

"Billie," said the teacher hurriedly, "I have never thanked you rightly for the great favor you did in returning my album to me. But I love you for it, dear. God bless you," and before Billie could think of a word to say in reply, the teacher had turned, slipped through one of the doors and disappeared.

Billie stood staring after Miss Arbuckle, lost in thought about her, until Laura and Vi, hurrying up, caught her by the arm and hustled her through the front door, down the steps and into the waiting carryall. The carryall, by the way, was to make many trips that day, even though a great many of the girls had automobiles belonging to their relatives or friends which would take them straight to their destination.

When the girls had climbed inside, the boys jumped in after them, and the carryall, having by

this time all that it could hold, started down the long, winding driveway to the road.

"Good-bye, Three Towers, for a little time, at least," cried Billie, while she felt a curious lump in her throat. She was terribly afraid she was going to cry, so she stopped talking and turned to stare out of the window.

"We've had a wonderful time there," said Laura in, for her, a very sober tone. "Better than *we* expected."

"Which is going *some,*" finished Vi slangily, and as slang from Vi somehow always made them laugh, they laughed now and felt better for it.

"Well, we didn't have such a very slow time ourselves," said Billie's brother Chet, his good looking face lighting up with eagerness.

"And it's something to have made a friend like Paul Martinson," spoke up Ferd Stowing from where he was squeezed in between Laura and Vi.

"You bet—he's some boy," added Teddy heartily, forgetting for the moment that there had been times when he had longed to throw Paul Martinson into the lake—or some deeper place—because he had talked too much to Billie.

But here was a beautiful long train ride before him when he could talk to Billie—or any one else—all he liked without having any Paul Martinson trying to "butt in" all the time. No wonder he was friends with all the world.

"Where is Paul? Why didn't he come with us?" asked Billie.

"He went home with his dad," Chet explained. "Of course he was crazy to see his motor boat, and then he had to make arrangements for our cruise. Oh boy, think of cruising around the coast in a motor boat!"

"We wanted Connie to come along with us," said Billie. "But she said she would have to go home first."

"When are you girls going to start for Lighthouse Island?" Ferd asked with interest. "Have you set any time yet?"

"Not a regular date," answered Laura. "But it will be in a week or two I think. We'll have to have time to get acquainted with the folks again and have our clothes fixed up——"

"And then Connie's coming on to North Bend," Vi added eagerly. "And we'll all go together from there to the coast. Oh dear, I can't wait to start."

"Well, I guess you'll have to," said Billie, with a sigh, "since we haven't even reached home yet."

"That reminds me," said Laura, turning upon Billie accusingly. "What were you doing standing in the hall just now and looking as though you had lost your last friend when Vi and I came along and woke you up? Come on, 'fess up."

Billie could not think for a moment what she had been doing, then she remembered Miss Arbuckle

and the rather peculiar way the teacher had thanked her for the return of the album.

She told the girls about it, and they listened with interest while the boys looked as if they would like to have known what it was all about.

"Now I wonder——" Laura was beginning when Billie suddenly caught her hand and pointed to the road.

"Look!" she cried. "It's Hugo Billings, our sad-faced man again. Oh, girls, I wish we could do something for him."

She leaned far out the window, smiled and waved her hand to the man, who was standing moodily by the roadside. At sight of her he straightened up and an answering smile flashed across his thin face, making him look so different that the girls were amazed.

But when they looked back at him again a few seconds later his smile had gone and he was staring after them gloomily.

"Goodness, I never saw a person look so sad in all my life," murmured Vi, as a turn in the road hid the man from view.

"Well, I have," said Billie. "And that's Miss Arbuckle!"

"There must be some sort of mystery about them both," remarked Laura. "Maybe that man has a whole lot on his mind."

"And maybe Miss Arbuckle isn't miss at all,"

added Vi. "Perhaps she's Mrs. Arbuckle and those children were her own."

Billie did not reply to this. She heaved something of a sigh. She was unable to explain it, but she felt very sorry for both the teacher and the queer man. Would the queer mystery ever be explained?

CHAPTER XI

AT HOME

A FEW hours later a train puffed noisily into the familiar station at North Bend, and as it came to a stop three boys and three girls tumbled down the steps of a car and literally ran into the arms of their waiting families.

At least, the girls did; the boys considered themselves far too dignified. However, they soon forgot dignity and everything else in a noisy and joyful recital of all the good times they had had during their year of absence.

Of course there had been others from the Military Academy and Three Towers Hall on the train whose friends and relatives had also come to meet them so that it was a very much excited crowd that wound its way up the ordinarily quiet main street of North Bend.

Gradually the crowd separated into little groups, each going its separate way to its separate home, and so at last, after many promises between the boys and girls to "call each other up right after dinner," the Bradley family found itself alone.

"Well," said Mr. Bradley, beaming proudly upon his children, who seemed to him to have grown at least twice as large during their absence, and three times as handsome, "you thought you *would* come back to your poor old country relations, did you? Your mother and I," he glanced fondly at his wife, "thought perhaps you had forgotten us by this time."

"We weren't very much worried, though," said Mrs. Bradley, looking so lovely in her happiness that Billie had to snuggle close to her to make sure she was real. For Mrs. Bradley was really a very beautiful woman, as well as a very sweet one, and Billie was growing more like her every day.

"And there's the darling old house," breathed Billie happily, "looking just the same as it did when I left it. Mother dear, and, Dad——" here she reached a hand out to her father—— "I think I'm the very happiest girl in all the world."

For a day or two after that it seemed the best thing in the world just to be at home again. But the third day the girls began to feel a little bit restless. They were longing to be off to Lighthouse Island with Connie Danvers. But they had not heard from Connie yet, and until they did there was nothing to be done but get things in shape and wait.

"Suppose she should change her mind," remarked Laura dolefully on the noon of the third day.

"Change her mind!" burst out Vi. She turned

enquiringly to Billie. "Do you think Connie would do anything like that?" she demanded.

"Certainly not," was Billie's quick reply. "Connie isn't that kind of a girl. Besides all the arrangements have been made. It is more than likely she has been so busy with a number of details that she has simply forgotten to write or telegraph."

"Well, anyway, this waiting is getting on my nerves," declared Laura.

"Let's do something to make the time pass more quickly," suggested Billie. "What do you say to going down town for a bit of shopping?"

"That suits me," answered Vi. "And we might have some ice-cream sodas while we are down there."

This suited all of them, and soon they were on the way to the shops where they spent the best part of the afternoon.

Then one day, over a week later, when they had begun to think that Connie had forgotten about them, a telegram came from her, saying that she was starting for North Bend the day after the next and she would be in on the six o'clock train. Would somebody please be there to meet her? Her mother and father had gone on ahead to Lighthouse Island to get everything ready for the girls when they arrived.

Would they be there to meet her! Billie was so excited that she couldn't eat her supper, and as

soon as she could get away from the table she rushed over to Laura's home to tell her the joyful news. From there the pair called up Vi and invited her to come and celebrate.

And celebrate they did until it got so late that Mrs. Jordon had gently but firmly to put them out, appointing Teddy to escort the girls home.

"I don't want your mothers to think I've kidnapped you," she called after them as she and Laura, the latter pouting a little, stood in the doorway to wave good-bye to them.

"Just the same, I think you might have let them stay a little longer," protested Laura as they turned to go inside. "It's only ten o'clock, and we had so much to talk about."

"I know," said Mrs. Jordon, putting an arm lightly about her young daughter's shoulders. "I was the same way at your age, dear. Mother had to send away my friends and put me to bed regularly every week or so. Now it's my turn, that's all."

Meanwhile Teddy and Billie had dropped Vi at her house and had turned down the broad, elm-shaded street on which stood the Bradley home.

For some reason or other they did not talk very much. They did not seem to find anything to say. Billie had never been alone like this with Teddy before, and she was wondering why it made her tongue-tied.

"I say, Billie," began Teddy, clearing his throat and looking down at her sideways—for all the world, as Billie thought, as if she were a mouse trap and might go off any minute—"is it really settled that you are going to start day after to-morrow?"

"Yes. And isn't it wonderful?" cried Billie, finding her voice as the blissful prospect opened up before her again. "I've never stayed at the seashore more than a day or two, Teddy, in my life, and now just think of spending the whole summer there. I can't believe yet that it isn't a dream."

"You want to be careful," said Teddy, staring straight before him, "if you go in bathing at all. There are awfully strong currents around there, you know."

"Oh, of course I know all about that," returned Billie, with the air of one who could not possibly be taught anything. "Connie says her Uncle Tom knows of a darling little inlet where the water's so calm it's almost like a swimming pool. Of course we'll do most of our swimming there. Oh, Teddy, you ought to see my new bathing suit!" She was rattling on rapturously when Teddy interrupted with a queer sort of question.

"Who is this Uncle Tom?" he asked, still staring straight ahead.

"Why, he's Connie's uncle, of course! The keeper of the light on Lighthouse Island," an-

swered Billie, as surprised as if he had asked her who Abraham Lincoln was. "Connie says he's a darling——"

"Is he married?"

"Why no. That is, I don't think so," answered Billie, knitting her brows in an effort to think whether Connie had ever said anything on this point. She had never even thought to ask if "Uncle Tom" was married. "Why, no, of course he can't be," she answered herself and Teddy at the same time. "If he was married he wouldn't be living in that old lighthouse all alone. And Connie said he did live there all alone. I remember that."

She nodded her head with satisfaction, but, strangely enough, Teddy did not seem to be satisfied at all. He just stalked along beside her in a sort of gloomy silence while she glanced up at him now and then with a mischievous hint of a laugh dancing about her pretty mouth.

"Teddy, where are you going?" she asked a minute later, as they reached the sidewalk that led to her house and instead of stopping Teddy stalked straight on. "I don't live down at the corner you know."

Teddy turned about with a sort of sheepish grin and rejoined her.

"I was just thinking," he said as they turned up the walk together.

"No wonder you went past," said Billie mis-

chievously. Then as they paused at the foot of the steps she looked up at him with an imp of laughter showing all the dimples about her mouth. "What were you thinking so hard about, Teddy?" she dared him.

"I was thinking," said Teddy, clearing his throat and looking anywhere but at Billie, "that I wouldn't mind going down to Lighthouse Island myself!"

Then he fled, leaving Billie to get into the house as best she could. But Billie did not mind. She was chuckling to herself and thinking how funny and foolish and—yes—awfully nice Teddy could be—sometimes.

CHAPTER XII

PREPARING FOR THE TRIP

CHET and Billie were at the train to meet Connie when she arrived, for it had been decided almost without argument that Connie would spend her one night in North Bend with the Bradleys.

Billie was in a fever of excitement even before the stream of people began to pour from the train, and when she saw Connie she made a wild dash for her that very nearly bowled over a couple of unfortunate men who were in the path.

"You darling!" cried Billie, hugging her friend rapturously. "Now I know it's all true. I was just scared to death for fear something would happen and you couldn't get here."

Poor Chet tried his best to edge his way in and speak a word to Connie on his own account—for Chet liked Connie Danvers very much—but he could not do any more than shake hands with her over Billie's shoulder and mumble one or two words which neither of the girls understood.

"They won't speak to you," he grumbled to himself as he brought up the rear with Connie's suit-

case and a hat box, "and the only time they know you're alive is when they want a baggage truck or something. Catch me ever coming to meet one of Billie's friends again."

He was relieved when Vi and Laura came running up all flushed with their hurry to "spill over Connie" some more, as Chet disgustedly put it and he had a chance to slip down a side street and "beat it" for home.

None of the girls even noticed that Chet had gone; a fact which, had he known it, would have made the boy still more disgusted with girls and everything about them.

"Connie, you do look sweet," Vi cried, as they all four tried to walk abreast along a sidewalk that was not very wide—the result being that Laura, who was on the end, walked half the time on the curb and the rest of the time in the gutter. "Is that a new hat? And, oh, I know you've got a new dress!"

"Well I'm not the only one who looks nice," said Connie, who, in spite of her prettiness, was very modest.

"Oh, we are a mess," said Laura, balancing nicely between the curb and the gutter. "We've got on our oldest dresses because everything we own is packed except the things we're going to wear to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" That was the magic word that

unlocked the gates and let through a flood of conversation consisting of excited questions and answers and joyful exclamations that lasted until they reached Billie's house.

Billie asked Laura and Vi in, but they reluctantly refused, saying that their mothers had expressly ordered them to be home that day in time for dinner.

"We can't come over to-night," Vi called back to them, as she and Laura started on arm in arm. "Mother says I have to get to bed early."

"But we'll see you the first thing in the morning," added Laura. "The very first thing, remember that!"

"I'll say so," Billie sang back gayly, and then led her guest up the porch steps and into the house, where her mother was waiting to receive them. Mrs. Bradley and Connie fell in love with each other at first sight—which was the last thing needed to make Billie absolutely happy.

They went to bed early that night, the two girls snuggled in Billie's pretty bird's-eye maple bed in Billie's pretty bird's-eye maple room.

They went to bed, but neither of the girls had either the desire or the intention of going to sleep. They felt as if they never wanted to go to sleep again.

And so they talked. They talked of the next day

and the vacation before them until they could not think of another thing to say about it.

Then they talked of the things that had happened at Three Towers Hall—of the "Dill Pickles" and of Amanda Peabody and Eliza Dilks. And last, but not least, they talked in hushed tones of the mysterious little hut in the woods and the strange man who lived there and wove fern baskets and other things for a living.

By the time they had reached Miss Arbuckle and the finding of her album in the woods they were feeling delightfully thrilly and farther away from sleep than ever.

"It really must be a mystery," Connie was saying, snuggling deeper into the covers and staring at Billie's pretty face and tousled hair weirdly illumined by the pale moonlight that sifted through the window, when there came a tap on the door. And right upon the tap came Mrs. Bradley, wearing a loose robe that made her look mysteriously lovely in the dim light. She sat down on the edge of the bed and regarded the girls smilingly.

"It's twelve o'clock," she said, and they stared at her unbelievingly. "Twelve o'clock," she repeated relentlessly, "and time for girls who have to be up early in the morning to be asleep."

"But we're not sleepy," protested Billie.

"Not a bit," added Connie.

Mrs. Bradley rose decidedly.

"Then it's time you were," she said, adding, with a little laugh: "If I hear a sound in here ten minutes from now, I'm coming after you with a broomstick. Remember," she added, laughing back at them from the doorway, "I give you just ten minutes."

"I think you've got just the loveliest mother," sighed Connie, as she turned over obediently with her back to Billie; "but I'm sure I never can go to sleep."

Five minutes passed, and the girls who could "never go to sleep," felt their eyelids grow heavy and a delicious drowsiness steal over them. Once Connie roused herself enough to say sleepily: "We'll just have to form that Detective Club, Billie, you know."

"Yes," said Billie, already half in the land of dreams. "When we—have—the time—good night, Connie——"

"Good night, Bil-lie——"

And the next they knew it was morning! And such a glorious morning had never dawned before—of that they were sure.

Fat Deborah, nicknamed "Debbie," who had been the cook in the Bradley family for years, and who thought that gave her the right to tell the whole family what was expected of them, from Billie up to Mr. Bradley himself, cooked them a breakfast

of ham and eggs and cereal and toast and corn bread, grumbling to herself all the time.

For Debbie did not approve at all of "the young folks scamperin' off jes' so soon as dey gets back home agin."

"Scand'lous, I calls it," Debbie confided to the pan of corn bread she was busily cutting into golden brown pieces. "Don' know what Miz Bradley 'lows she's thinkin' on, nohow. But these am scand'lous days—they sho is." Whereupon she put on a white apron and her dignity and marched into the dining room.

Yet in spite of her disapproval, Debbie gave the young "scalawags" the best breakfast she could make, and from the way the young "scalawags" did justice to it, one might have thought they did not expect to get any more to eat for a week at least.

Then they went upstairs to pack bags with the last minute things. Billie and Connie went over the whole list backward to be sure they had not forgotten a toothbrush "or something." To them it was a very important list.

And when everything was done and their hats and coats on, they found to their dismay that they still had three-quarters of an hour to wait for the train.

"Goodness, why did Mother call us so early!" wailed Billie, sitting down on her suitcase and star-

ing at Connie. "I can do anything but wait. But that I just can't do!"

"Couldn't we go over and call for Laura and Vi?" Connie suggested.

"My, they won't be up yet," said Billie hysterically, then chuckled at Connie's look of dismay. "I didn't mean quite that," she said. "But Vi is always late."

"Then I know we'd better go over!" said Connie, going over and giving her hat one last little pat before the mirror.

But Billie had walked over to the window, and now she called out excitedly.

"Here they come now," she reported, adding with a chuckle: "And there's poor Teddy in the rear carrying two suitcases and something that looks like a lunch box. Come on, let's go down."

And down they went, taking two steps at a time. Billie opened the door just as the two girls and Teddy came up the steps. Chet, who had run out, attracted by the noise, and was looking over Billie's shoulder, caught sight of Teddy and the load he carried and emitted a whoop of joy.

"Hello, old moving van!" he called. "So they've got you doing it too, have they?"

Teddie set his load down on the steps and mopped his perspiring brow.

"Yes. And you'd better get busy yourself," he retorted, adding as Chet seemed about to protest:

"I've got some good news. Get your duds and I'll tell it to you on the way to the station."

That got Chet started in a hurry, and a few minutes later the young folks had said a loving good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Bradley, and were off, bag and baggage, for the station.

The girls' trunks had been sent down the day before, so that all they had to do was to check them at the station. Connie, of course, had had her trunk checked right through to the station nearest their destination.

Chet clamored for Teddy's news, and excitedly Teddy showed him the letter from Paul Martinson saying that the "old boat" would be ready to sail in a few days.

"Whoop!" cried Chet joyfully, trying to wave a suitcase in the air and nearly dropping it on his toe instead. "Say, girls, you may see us even before you hoped to."

"Hoped to!" sniffed Laura. "Don't you hate yourself?"

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Billie, her eyes shining. "It will be a lark to have you boys drop in on us some morning when we don't expect you. Oh, it's just grand! We'll be sure to be watching for all of you."

The rejoicing was cut short by the arrival of the train a few minutes later. The girls scurried ex-

citedly on board, the boys handing in their suitcases after them.

As the train started to move Teddy ran along the platform with it and suddenly thrust something into Billie's hand.

"Look out for those currents," he said. "They're awfully dangerous."

As he dropped back to join Chet, Billie looked down at the thing in her hand. It was a package of chocolate.

CHAPTER XIII

PLEASURE DRAWS NEAR

As SHE looked, a flush stole over Billie's face and she tried hastily to hide the chocolate in the pocket of her suit before the girls could see it.

She would have succeeded if Vi had not accidentally touched her elbow at that moment, knocking the package of chocolate from her hand and into the aisle of the car where it lay, face up, accusingly.

Billie stretched out an eager hand for it, but Laura was just before her.

"Aha!" she cried triumphantly, waving the little brown rectangle aloft. "Candy! Where'd you get it, Billie Bradley?" She turned swiftly upon Billie, whose face was the color of a particularly gorgeous beet. Vi and Connie looked on delightedly.

"Goodness! anybody would think it was a crime to have candy," cried Billie indignantly. "You give it to me, Laura, or——" She made a grab for her property, but Laura snatched it back out of her reach.

"No, you don't," she said, putting her hands

behind her determinedly. "Not till you tell us where you got it."

"Well I'm not going to," said Billie crossly. "It's none of your business." And she turned away and looked steadily out of the window.

"Give it back to her, Laura," begged Vi. "It isn't fair to tease her so."

"Well then, she shouldn't tease so beautifully," Laura retorted, as, relenting, she slipped Teddy's gift back into Billie's pocket.

At that moment they were startled by a fearful racket—a sound as if all the South Sea pirates that had ever been born had gathered together and were all quarreling at once.

There was a great craning of necks as startled passengers tried to see what it was all about and the girls fairly jumped from their seats—for the racket sounded in their very ears.

Across the aisle from them there was a parrot—a great green and red parrot that at that moment was hanging by its claws to the roof of its cage and was still emitting the raucous squawks that sounded like the talking of a hundred pirates all rolled into one.

An elderly woman who looked as if she might be a spinster of the type generally known as "old maid" was doing her best to silence the bird while she fished wildly in her bag for something.

She found what she was looking for—a heavy black cloth, and, with a sigh of relief, flung it across

the cage. Immediately the parrot's uproar subsided to a muttering and a moment later stopped altogether.

Passengers who had craned their necks dropped back in their seats chuckling, picked up magazines or papers or whatever they had been reading where they had left off, and peace settled over the car again. For all save the girls, that is.

For the elderly woman—who most certainly *was* an old maid—had been terribly embarrassed over the bird's outbreak and began explaining to the girls how she happened to have it in her possession, what troubles she had already had with it, how glad she would be when she delivered the bird to her brother, who was its rightful owner, and so on until the girls became desperate enough to throw things at her.

"Isn't there some way we can stop her!" whispered Vi in Connie's ear, while Billie and Laura were listening to the woman's chatter with forced smiles and polite "yeses and nos." "If I have to listen to that voice another minute I'll scream—I know I shall."

"The only way to stop her that I can think of," Connie whispered back, "would be to take the cover off the parrot's cage. He would drown out most anybody."

This kept up practically all morning with the owner of the parrot talking on tirelessly and the

girls trying to listen politely until lunch time came.

Thankfully they made their way through the swaying train to the dining car and sat themselves gratefully down at a little table set for four.

"Thank goodness we've escaped," sighed Billie, as her eyes wandered eagerly down the bill of fare, for Billie was very hungry. "What will you have, girls? I could eat everything on the card without stopping to breathe."

When they returned to their car after lunch they found to their relief that the talkative old woman was gathering up her things as if about to change cars at the junction—which was the next stop.

She did get out at the junction, parrot and all, and the girls fairly hugged each other in their delight.

"Poor old thing," said Billie as the train swung out from the station and the parrot cage disappeared. "I wonder," she added after a moment, "if I'll ever get like that."

"You!" scoffed Vi, with a fond glance at Billie's lovely face. "Yes, you look a lot like an old maid."

"And didn't Teddy give her candy this morning?" added Laura, with a wicked glance at Billie, who said not a word, but stared steadily out of the window.

They bought magazines and tried to read them, but finally gave up the attempt. What was the use of reading about other people's adventures when a

far more thrilling one was in store for them at Lighthouse Island?

Billie said something like this, but Connie shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't know how we're going to have any adventures," she said. "There isn't so very much to do besides swimming and rowing in Uncle Tom's rowboat——"

"Goodness, isn't that enough?" said Billie, turning on her. "Why, just being at the seashore is an adventure. Just think, I've never in my life been inside a really truly lighthouse. It's going to be just wonderful, Connie."

"And aren't the boys coming in their motor boat, too?" added Vi eagerly. "Why, they will probably take us for a sail around the point and everything. Connie, how can you say we're not going to have any adventures?"

Connie laughed.

"All right," she said. "Don't shoot. I'll take it all back. And there's Uncle Tom's clam chowder," she added. "People come from all over just to taste it."

"What time is it, Laura?" asked Billie, turning from the window suddenly and tapping nervously on the window sill. "It won't take us very much longer to get there, will it?"

"Only three hours," answered Laura, consulting her wrist watch.

"Only three hours!" groaned Billie. "And I thought we were nearly there."

There was silence for a little while after that while the girls took up their magazines again and turned the pages listlessly. At the end of another half hour they gave up the attempt entirely and leaned their heads wearily against the backs of the seats, fixing their eyes upon the ever-changing scenery that fled past them.

"Are we going to form our Detective Club?" asked Connie suddenly out of the silence.

The girls stared at her a minute as if she had roused them out of sleep.

"For goodness sake, what made you think of that now?" asked Laura a little peevishly. "I'm so tired I don't want to form clubs or anything else. All I want is to get out somewhere where I can stretch my legs, get some supper, and go to bed. I'm dead."

"You're making lots of noise for a dead one," chuckled Billie, and Laura made a face at her.

"But no one's answered my question," broke in Connie plaintively. "I thought you girls loved mysteries and things."

"Well, who says we don't?" cried Laura. "Just show me a good live mystery and I'll forget I'm all tied up in knots and everything."

"Just listen to her!" exclaimed Connie indignantly. "Do you mean to say you've forgotten that we have a mystery already?"

"Oh—that," said Laura slowly, while a light began to dawn. "Yes, I did forget about it; we've been so busy getting ready and everything."

"Well, I haven't forgotten about it," said Billie, sitting up suddenly, while her cheeks began to glow pink. "And the more I think about it, the funnier it seems to me."

"What?" asked Vi.

"Oh, everything," answered Billie, getting more excited as she spoke. "Hugo Billings in the first place. And then finding Miss Arbuckle's album in the woods. And the children. Girls, I'm just sure they are mysteries—and real ones, too."

CHAPTER XIV

THE LIGHT ON LIGHTHOUSE ISLAND

LAURA looked faintly excited for a minute, then she leaned back wearily in her seat again.

"I'm just as sure as you are, Billie, that there's something funny about it," she said. "But if we really had wanted to solve the mystery, we should have stayed at Three Towers. The first thing they do in detective stories is to shadow the people they suspect. And how can we do that, I'd like to know, when we're running straight away from them?"

This was very good reasoning. Even Billie and Connie had to admit that, and they began to look worried.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have asked you girls to visit me. Then you might have stayed at Three Towers for the summer and solved the mystery. Now I've spoiled all the fun——"

"Connie! don't be such an absolute goose," cried Billie, putting a hand over Connie's mouth. "Do you suppose we'd have missed this for anything?"

"Anyway," added Vi hopefully, "we may find some more mysteries on Lighthouse Island."

"Humph," grumbled Laura, who was feeling tired and cross, "you talk as if mysteries were just hanging around loose begging to be found."

"Well, I think maybe we'll manage to enjoy ourselves, even without mysteries," said Billie gayly. Nevertheless, she could not help thinking to herself: "Oh, dear, I do wish there was some way I could find out about Miss Arbuckle and those lovely children and poor lonely, sad Hugo Billings. I should like to help if I only knew how!"

"Billie, wake up! Wake up—it's time to get off!"

She must have been very sound asleep because it was several seconds before she fought her way through a sea of unconsciousness and opened heavy eyes upon a scene of confusion.

"What's the matter?" she asked sleepily, but some one, she thought it was Laura, shook her impatiently, and some one else—she was wide awake enough now to be sure this was Vi—put a hat on her head and pushed it so far over her eyes that she temporarily went blind again.

"For goodness sake, can't you put it on straight?" she demanded indignantly, pushing the hat back where it belonged. "What do you think you're doing anyway?"

A little anger was the best thing that could have come to Billie. It was about the only thing in the world that would have gotten her wide awake just then. And it was very necessary that she should

be wide awake, for the train was just drawing into the station where they were to get off to take the boat to Lighthouse Island.

She took the bag thrust into her hands by Laura, and the girls hurried out into the aisle that was crowded with people. A minute more, and they found themselves on a platform down which people hurried and porters rolled their baggage trucks and where every one seemed intent upon making as much noise as possible.

Billie and Laura and Vi felt very much bewildered, for they had never done any traveling except in the company of some older person; but with a confidence that surprised them, Connie took command of the situation. For Connie had traveled this route several times, and everything about it was familiar to her.

"Give me your trunk checks," she ordered, adding, as the girls obediently fumbled in their pocketbooks: "We'll have to hustle if we want to get our trunks straightened out and get on board ourselves before the boat starts. What's the matter, Vi, you haven't lost your check, have you?"

For one terrible minute Vi had been afraid she had done just this, but now, with a sigh of relief, she produced the check and handed it over to Connie.

"My, but that was a narrow escape," she mur-

mured, as they hurried down the crowded platform.

The boat that plied from the mainland to Lighthouse Island and one or two more small islands scattered about near the coast was a small but tidy little vessel that was really capable of better speed than most people gave her credit for. She was painted a sort of dingy white, and large black letters along her bow proclaimed her to be none other than the *Mary Ann.*

And now as the girls, with several other passengers, stepped on board and felt the cool breeze upon their faces they breathed deep of the salty air and gazed wonderingly out over the majestic ocean rolling on and on in unbroken swells toward the distant horizon.

Gone was all the fatigue of the long train ride. They forgot that their lungs were full of soft coal dirt, that their hands were grimy, and their faces, too. They were completely under the spell of that great, mysterious tyrant—the ocean.

"Isn't this grand!"

"Just smell the salt air!"

"Makes you feel braced up already," came from Billie, who had been filling her lungs to the utmost. "Oh, girls! I'm just crazy to jump in and have a swim."

"I'm with you on that," broke out Vi. "Oh, I'm sure we're going to have just the best times ever!"

There was a fair-sized crowd to get aboard, made up partly of natives and partly of city folks. The passengers were followed by a number of trunks and a small amount of freight.

"Evidently we're not the only ones to take this trip," remarked Billie, as she noted the people coming on board the *Mary Ann.*

"A number of these people must live on the islands the year around," said Laura.

"My, how lonely it must be on this coast during the winter months," said Billie. "Think of being out on one of those islands in a howling snowstorm!"

"I wonder how they get anything to eat during those times?" questioned Vi.

"I presume they keep stuff on hand," answered Billie.

With a sharp toot of her whistle the boat moved out from the dock, made her way carefully among the numerous other craft in the harbor, and finally nosed her way out into the water of the channel.

"O—oh," breathed Vi, softly. "It's even more wonderful than I thought it would be. I'd like to go sailing on and on like this forever."

"Well, I wouldn't," said Laura practically. "Not without any supper. I'm getting a perfectly awful appetite."

"It will be worse than that after you've been here a little while," laughed Connie. "Mother says that

it seems as if she never can give me enough to eat when we come out to the seashore, so she has given up trying."

"Your poor mother!" said Billie dolefully. "And now she has four of us!"

"I know," chuckled Connie. "Mother was worrying a little about that—as to how she could keep four famished wolves fed at one time. But Uncle Tom said he'd help her out."

"Your Uncle Tom," Vi repeated wonderingly. "Can he cook?"

"Of course," said Connie, looking at her as if she had asked if the world was square. "Didn't I tell you about his clam chowder?"

"Oh," said Vi thoughtfully, while something within her began to cry out for a sample of that clam chowder. "Oh yes, I remember."

"Connie, you're cruel," moaned Laura. "Can't you talk of something besides clam chowder when you know I'm starving to death? Goodness, I can almost smell it."

"That's the clams you smell," chuckled Connie. "They always have some on board the *Mary Ann* to sell to the islanders—if they haven't the sense to catch them themselves. We never need to buy any," she added, proudly. "Uncle Tom keeps us supplied with all we want. Look!" she cried suddenly, pointing to a small island which loomed directly ahead of them, looking in the grey mist of evening like only

a darker shadow against the shifting background. "That's our island—see? And there's the light," she added, as a sudden beacon flashed out at them, sending a ruddy light out over the dark water.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful!" cried Billie rapturously. "Just think what it must mean to the ships out at sea—that friendly light, beckoning to them——"

"No, it doesn't—beckon, I mean," said Connie decidedly. "That's just what it isn't for. It's to warn them to keep away or they'll be sorry."

"Is there so much danger?" asked Laura eagerly.

"I should say there is," Connie answered gravely. "In a storm especially. You see, the water is very shallow around here and if a big ship runs in too close to shore she's apt to get on a shoal. That isn't so bad in clear weather—although a ship did get stuck on the shoal here not so very long ago and she was pretty much damaged when they got her off. But in a storm——"

"Yes," cried Billie impatiently.

"Why, Uncle Tom says," Connie was very serious, "that if a ship were driven upon the shoal in a gale—and we have terrible storms around here—it would probably come with such force that its bottom would be pretty nearly crushed in and the people on board might die before any one could get out there to rescue them."

"Oh, Connie, how dreadful!" cried Vi. Laura and Billie only stared at the lighthouse tower as

though fascinated, while the little boat came steadily nearer to it.

"Has anything like that ever happened here, Connie?" asked Laura in an awed voice.

"No," said Connie. "There was a terrible wreck here a long time ago—before they built the lighthouse. But Uncle Tom says no one will ever know just how many lives have been saved because of the good old light. To hear him talk to it you would think it was alive."

"It is!" cried Billie, pointing excitedly as the great white globe that held the light swung slowly around toward them. "Didn't you see that? It winked at us!"

CHAPTER XV

CONNIE'S MOTHER

THE steamer scraped against the dock and the girls straightened their hats, picked up their suitcases, and started down the narrow winding stairs that led to the lower deck.

Connie led the way as she had done ever since they had left North Bend. She scrambled quickly out upon the pier and the chums, following more slowly, were in time to see Connie rapturously embrace first a lady and then a gentleman standing near by.

"Well, well!" a deep masculine voice was saying, "it seems mighty good to see our girl again. But where are the others?"

Connie turned eagerly to the girls.

"This is my mother and father, Billie and Laura and Vi," she said, with a proud wave of her hand toward her smiling parents, who came forward and greeted the girls cordially.

"It's too dark to see your faces," Mrs. Danvers said. "But Connie has described you to us so many

times that it isn't at all necessary. I'm sure I know just exactly what you look like."

"Oh, but they're three times as nice as anything I've said about them," Connie was protesting when her father, who had been conversing with the captain of the *Mary Ann,* stepped up to them.

"If you young ladies will give me your checks," he said—and the girls knew they were going to love him because his voice sounded so kind—"I'll attend to your trunks and you can go on up to the house."

The girls produced their checks, Mr. Danvers went back to the captain, and Mrs. Danvers and the girls started off in high spirits toward the bungalow.

"Are you very tired?" Mrs. Danvers asked them, and the turn of her head as she looked at them made the girls think of some pert, plump, cheery little robin.

It was really getting very dark, and the girls could not make out what she looked like, but they could see that she was small and graceful and her voice—well, her voice had a gay lilt that made one want to laugh even though all she said was "what a pleasant day it is." No wonder, with that father and mother, Connie was such a darling.

"Why, no, we're not very tired," Billie said in answer to Mrs. Danvers' question. "We were on the train, but the minute we got on board the boat we seemed to forget all about it. It's this beautiful

salt air, I suppose," and she sniffed happily at the soft, salt laden breeze that came wandering up from the sea.

"Of course it's the air," agreed Mrs. Danvers gayly. "The air does all sorts of wonderful things to us. You just wait a few days and see."

They were walking along a rough boardwalk set quite a way back from the water's edge so that there was a white stretch of beach between it and the first thin line of lapping waves.

"Why, look at the boardwalk!" cried Laura, in wonder.

"You didn't say anything about a boardwalk down here, Connie," added Vi. "You're really right up to date, aren't you?"

"What did you suppose?" put in Billie. "That Lighthouse Island was in the backwoods and had no improvements?" And she laughed gayly.

"Well, I know that very few of the islands on this coast have boardwalks," defended Laura. "Most of them have the roughest kind of stony paths."

"You are right, there," said Connie. "I remember only too well when I was on Chatter Island we had to climb over the rocks all the way, and one day I twisted my ankle most dreadfully—so badly, in fact, that I was laid up for three days while all the other girls were having the best time ever."

"I know what I'd do on a real dark night," remarked Billie dryly. "If I couldn't see where I was

stepping, I'd take my chances and walk in the sand."

"I do that myself sometimes," answered Connie.

Several bungalows dotted the rather barren landscape, for Lighthouse Island was an ideal spot for a summer home—that is if one liked the seashore.

But the girls were not so much interested in what was on the island as they were in what was beyond it. The ocean—the great dark, mysterious ocean drew their eyes irresistibly and set their minds to wandering. And as the days passed they were to feel the spell of it more and more.

"Here we are," Mrs. Danvers said cheerily, and with an effort the girls brought their thoughts back to the present.

Mrs. Danvers had turned from the main boardwalk down another that led to a bungalow whose every window was cheerfully and invitingly lighted.

"Be careful where you step," Mrs. Danvers called back to them, and the girls saw that she was picking her steps very carefully. "There are two or three boards missing, and I can't get Mr. Danvers to do the repairing. He spends whole days," she added, turning plaintively to Connie, "up in that old lighthouse just talking to your Uncle Tom. I don't know whether it's your Uncle Tom's conversation he finds so fascinating or his clam chowder."

She opened the door as she spoke and the girls had a vision of a comfortable, gayly lighted room

all wicker chairs and chintz cushions and chintz hangings, a room pretty and cozy, a room that seemed to be beckoning and inviting the girls to come in and make themselves at home.

Which they did—immediately. All except Billie, who stepped back a moment and gazed off through the dusk to the light in the lighthouse tower glowing its warning to the travelers over the dark highways of the sea.

"I love it," she said, surprising herself by her fervor. "It looks so bright and brave and lonely."

Then she stepped in after the others and almost ran into Connie, who was coming back to get her.

"What were you doing all by yourself out there in the dark?" she asked accusingly. "We thought you had run away or something."

"Goodness. where would I run to?" asked Billie, as they went upstairs together arm in arm. "There's no place to run accept into the ocean, and I'd rather wait for that till I have my bathing suit on."

They found Mrs. Danvers and Laura and Vi in a large room as pretty and comfortable as the room downstairs, though not quite so elaborate. Laura and Vi were busily engaged in making themselves entirely at home.

Laura had her hat off and was fixing her hair in front of a mirror and Vi was hanging up her coat in the closet.

"You see there's a connecting door between these

two rooms," Mrs. Danvers said in her pleasant voice; "so that you girls can feel almost as if you were in one room."

Then as she caught sight of Billie and Connie in the doorway she beckoned to them and disappeared into the next room, and with a laughing word to Laura and Vi they followed her.

This was the room that she and Connie were to occupy, Billie found, and she looked about her at the handsome mahogany furniture and dainty dressing table fixings with interest.

But she was even more interested in seeing what Connie's mother looked like in the light. She was not a bit disappointed, for Mrs. Danvers' looks entirely matched her voice.

Her eyes were a wide laughing hazel, set far apart and fringed with dark lashes. Her hair, for she had not worn a hat, was a soft brown, and the night wind had whipped a pretty color into her face.

"She is awfully pretty. Not as pretty as my mother," Billie thought loyally, "but awfully pretty just the same."

Billie must have been staring more than she knew, for suddenly Mrs. Danvers—it seemed absurd to call her "Mrs," she looked so like a girl—turned upon her and took her laughingly by the shoulders.

"So you're Billie Bradley," she said, her hazel eyes searching Billie's brown ones. "Connie said

you were the most popular girl at Three Towers and that all the girls loved you. I can't say that I blame them, my dear," giving Billie's flushed cheek a gay little pat. "I'm not very sure but what I may do it myself. Now here——" And she went on to give directions while Billie followed her with wondering eyes. How could a woman who was old enough to be Connie's mother look so absolutely and entirely like a girl of twenty? She was not even dignified like most of the mothers Billie knew—she did not even try to be. Connie treated her as she would an older and much loved sister. One only needed to be with them three minutes to see that mother and daughter adored each other and were the very best chums in the world. And right then and there Billie began adoring too.

"Now I'll run downstairs and get something on the table for you girls to eat, for I know you must be starving," said Mrs. Danvers, or rather "Connie's mother," as Billie called her from that day on. "Don't stop to fix up, girls, for there won't be a soul here to-night but Daddy and me—and we don't care. Hurry now. If you are not downstairs by the time I have dinner on the table I'll eat it all myself, every bit." With that she was gone into the next room, leaving a trail of laughter behind her that made Billie's heart laugh in sympathy.

"Connie," she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and regarding her chum soberly as she

opened her bag and drew out a brush and comb, "I'm simply crazy about your mother. She's so young and pretty and—and—happy. Does she ever do anything but laugh?"

"Not often," said Connie, adding with a little chuckle: "But when she does stop laughing you'd better look out for 'breakers ahead,' as Uncle Tom says. Mother's French you know, and she has a temper—about once a year. But for goodness sake, stop talking, Billie, and get ready. You've got a patch of dirt under one eye. What's that I smell? It's clam chowder!"

"Clam chowder," repeated Billie weakly. "Are you sure it's clam chowder, Connie?"

"Yes, clam chowder," repeated Connie firmly.

CHAPTER XVI

CLAM CHOWDER AND SALT AIR

CONNIE was right, gloriously right. It was clam chowder—the kind of clam chowder one dreams about—come true. Uncle Tom had made it just that very afternoon and had brought it over in a huge bucket that was always used for such occasions.

The girls ate and ate and ate and then ate some more until they were completely satisfied with life and were feeling contented and beautifully, wonderfully drowsy.

Connie's mother had served them other things beside clam chowder. There were pork chops and apple sauce, there were muffins and honey and apple pie, and when they had finished, the once full table looked as if a swarm of locusts had been at it.

And all the time Connie's mother had watched them with wide, delighted eyes and Connie's father had lounged back in his chair, smoking a cigar and looking on with an indulgent smile.

Mr. Danvers, with the aid of a couple of men from the dock had got the girls' trunks up to the

house and into the rooms they were going to occupy for the summer.

And now, having done his duty, he had sauntered into the dining room to get acquainted with the girls and smoke a cigar. He and Mrs. Danvers had had their dinner earlier, because, as Mrs. Danvers laughingly explained, "she had been famished and could not wait," so that now there was nothing to do but watch the girls enjoy themselves.

The dining room was like all the other rooms in the cottage, cheerful and cozy and tastefully furnished, and as the girls looked about them happily they felt that they must have known the house and its owners all their lives.

Mr. Danvers was many years older than his wife, and he looked even older than he was. But he was a handsome man, and the touch of gray in the hair at his temples only made him look more distinguished. He adored his wife, and his eyes followed her wherever she went.

"As if any one could blame him for that," thought Billie, as Mrs. Danvers slipped a second piece of apple pie on her plate.

"My gracious! do you expect me to eat a second piece of pie?" cried Billie, glancing up at Mrs. Danvers, with a smile.

"A second piece of pie isn't very much for a young girl with a healthy appetite," returned the lady of the bungalow.

"You give her too much pie, and she'll be dreaming of all sorts of things," remonstrated Vi.

"Why, Vi! To talk that way when you are eating a second piece yourself!" broke in Laura.

"If we dream, perhaps we'll all dream together, so what's the difference?" remarked Billie; and at this there was a laugh in which even Mr. Danvers joined.

After dinner Connie's mother sent them up to their rooms, saying that she knew they must be tired to death and should go to bed early so they could get up to see the sun rise the next morning.

They did not protest very much, for they were tired and the prospect of bed was very alluring. To-morrow—well, to-morrow they would go exploring. Perhaps they might even be permitted to visit the lighthouse and Uncle Tom. Speaking of Uncle Tom made Billie think of the clam chowder, and although she could not have eaten another scrap if she had tried, her mouth watered at the memory.

The girls left the connecting door open between the two rooms so that they could talk to each other if they wanted to, but they did not do very much talking that night.

"Oh, this feels good," sighed Billie, as Connie turned down the covers and she crawled thankfully into bed. "I didn't know I was so awfully tired. And that dinner! Connie, does your mother always serve dinners like that?"

"Yes," said Connie, flinging her thick braid over her shoulder and crossing the room to turn out the light. "Mother's an awfully good cook, and although we have a maid to do the heavy work Mother does all the cooking herself."

"Well," said Billie, snuggling down under the covers luxuriously as Connie joined her, "I'm mighty glad I came."

"Even if we don't solve any mysteries?" asked Connie, a trifle wistfully.

Billie turned over and tried to see her face, a thing impossible, of course, in the dark.

"What a foolish thing to say," she cried. "I'll shake you, Connie Danvers, if you ever say a thing like that again. We could have stayed at Three Towers if we had wanted to solve mysteries more than we wanted to come here, couldn't we?"

"Y—yes," said Connie doubtfully. "Only, of course, we didn't know anything about the mystery when I asked you to come here. So you couldn't have backed out very well, even if you had wanted to."

Billie turned over impatiently and caught Connie by the shoulder.

"Connie Danvers!" she cried, "now I know you want to be shaken. Are you really trying to say that we didn't want to come with you and only did it to please you?"

"No," said Connie, with a shake of her head.

"Of course I didn't mean just that. Just the same," she added longingly, "I am awfully anxious to find out about Miss Arbuckle and her album and—that strange man—everything."

It was then that a horrible thought struck Billie, and it was so horrible that it sat her straight up in bed.

"Connie—I just thought—could it—were you sorry you asked us to come?" she stammered. "Would you rather have stayed at Three Towers yourself?"

For a minute there was silence and Billie knew that Connie was staring through the dark at her in absolute amazement.

"You perfectly silly goose," said Connie then, her bewilderment changing to indignation. "Now I know who wants to be shaken. Lie down here, Billie, and see if you can act sensibly. Sorry I asked you!" she exploded indignantly. "Why, who ever heard of such a thing!"

"But you said you wanted to solve the mystery —if there is one," Billie reminded her, lying down again.

"Well, of course I do. So do all the rest of you," Connie shot back. "But as to being sorry I asked you, why, I've a good mind——" She rose threateningly in the bed and Billie put out a pleading hand, saying with a chuckle:

"Please don't kill me or do whatever you were going to. I take it all back."

"I should say you'd better!" sputtered Connie, coming down with a thump in the bed.

"What are you girls raving about?" asked a sleepy voice from the next room that they recognized as Vi's. "Can't you keep still and let a fellow sleep? Laura's snoring already."

"Oh, I am not!" came indignantly from Laura. "I never snore!"

"How do you know?" asked Vi with interest.

"Know!" sputtered Laura. "Why, I don't know how I know, but I do know."

"Perhaps you are like an aunt of mine," Vi's voice came lazily back. "She says she knows she never snores because she stayed awake all night once just to see if she did."

Billie and Connie chuckled, which would have made Laura more indignant if she had not been so sleepy.

"Oh, for goodness sake, keep still and let me sleep," she cried, adding ferociously: "I saw a knife around somewhere downstairs. If anybody speaks another word I'm going down and get it."

Whether this threat had anything to do with it or not, it would be hard to say. But at any rate the girls did stop talking and settled down for sleep.

All but one of them succeeded in drifting off into

the land of nod in no time at all, but that one of them—who was Billie—lay for a long time with eyes wide open staring into the dark.

Then gradually the soft lapping of waves upon the beach soothed her into a sort of doze where tall thin men and shabby picture albums and queer little huts were all confused and jumbled together. Only one thing stood out clearly, and that was the great searchlight, twinkling, winking, glowing, sending its friendly message far out upon the sea.

Then all the troubled visions disappeared in a soft black cloud. Billie was asleep.

CHAPTER XVII

FUN AND NONSENSE

THE next morning the girls were up with the sun. They were in hilarious spirits and made so much noise that Mrs. Danvers, busily getting breakfast in the kitchen below, smiled to herself and hugged a big collie that at that moment strolled leisurely into the room.

The big collie's name was Bruce, and he belonged to Uncle Tom of the lighthouse. But although Uncle Tom was his master and was first in his dog's heart, Connie's mother was his very next best beloved and Bruce spent his time nearly equally between the lighthouse and Uncle Tom and the cottage and Connie's mother.

Now he answered the woman's hug with a loving look from his beautiful eyes and waved his brush gratefully.

"Bruce darling," said Connie's mother, as she lifted a pan of biscuits and shoved it into the oven, "it's a perfectly gorgeous morning and a perfectly gorgeous world and you're a perfectly gorgeous

dog. Now don't deny it. You know you are! How about it?"

To which Bruce responded by a more vigorous waving of his white tipped brush that very nearly swept a second pan of biscuits off on to the well-swept floor.

Connie's mother rescued it with a quick motion of her arm and stared at Bruce reproachfully.

"Bruce, just suppose you had spoiled it!" she scolded, as she slipped the pan into the oven after its fellow. "Don't you know that I have four hungry girls to feed, to say nothing of a great big husband——"

"Now what are you saying about me?" asked a man's pleasant voice from the doorway, adding as Connie's mother turned toward him: "Can't I help, dear? You look rather warm."

"Warm! Well, I should say I was!" said Connie's mother, sweeping a stray lock of hair back out of her eyes. "But what do I care when it's such a wonderful world? Haven't I got my baby back again, and three others as well? They're sweet girls, aren't they, John? And Billie Bradley is going to be a beauty."

"Well, I know some one else who is a beauty," said Mr. Danvers, looking admiringly at his wife's rosy face and wide-apart, laughing eyes, adding with a smile: "Even though she has a big patch of flour under one eye."

"Oh!" cried Connie's mother, and wiped her face vigorously with a pink and white checked apron. "Now just for that," she said, turning to her husband, who was still lounging in the doorway, "I'm going to put you out. And Bruce, too. I have enough to do without having a husband who makes fun of me and a dog who sticks his tail into everything under my feet all the time. Hurry on," and she pushed her protesting, laughing husband and the reluctant dog out through the open door and into the brilliant sunshine beyond.

"Are you going to call us in time for breakfast?" Mr. Danvers called back to his wife over his shoulder.

"Of course," she answered. "I'll send Connie after you." And she playfully waved a frying pan at him.

"She put us out, Bruce," said Mr. Danvers laying a caressing hand on the dog's beautiful head as he walked gravely along beside him. "But we love her just the same, don't we?" And Bruce's answer was to press close to Mr. Danvers and wave his tail enthusiastically.

Hardly had Mrs. Danvers had time to put the bacon in the oven to keep warm and break the eggs into the pan when there was a sound of skirmishing on the stairs, and a moment later a whirlwind broke in upon her.

"Mother, Mother, Mother, everything smells

good!" cried Connie, dancing over to her mother and hugging her so energetically that she almost sent the eggs, pan and all, on the floor. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Yes—go away," cried Connie's mother, seeing with dismay that one of the eggs in the pan was broken—and Connie's mother prided herself upon serving perfect eggs. Then, as she saw the surprise in the girls faces, she relented, left the eggs to their fate, and hugged them all.

"You're darlings," she said. "But you're awfully in the way. Billie, for goodness sake, hand me that pancake turner. Quick! These eggs are going to be awful!"

But Billie had jumped to the rescue, and when the eggs were turned out on the platter with the bacon surrounding them on four sides, they did not look "awful" at all, but just about the most appetizing things the girls had ever laid hungry eyes on.

"Oh, let me carry them!"

"No, let me!"

"I'll do it!"

And to a chorus of a score or so other such pleas, the eggs were borne triumphantly into the dining room and set carefully on the table.

"Now the biscuits!" cried Connie, running back into the kitchen where her mother was just heap-

ing another platter high with golden brown deliciousness.

"Oh, Mother," said Conne, darting a kiss at her mother that landed just exactly on the tip of Mrs. Danvers' pretty astonished nose, "everything you cook always looks just exactly like you."

Then she disappeared with the biscuits, leaving her mother to rub her nose and smile somewhat proudly.

"I guess it must have been a compliment," she chuckled, as she followed Connie with a second plate of biscuits, "for they always seem to like what I cook."

The girls were already waiting politely but impatiently for her. She was about to sit down when she thought of Mr. Danvers. She looked hastily at Connie.

"I told your father I'd send you after him when breakfast was ready," she said; and Connie looked dismayed.

"Oh, bother!" she said. "I just know they'll eat all the biscuits before I get back."

"No, we won't. We promise," said Billie; but Connie still looked doubtful enough to make them giggle as she flung out of the door in search of her father.

She had been gone scarcely two minutes when she returned triumphantly with her father and Bruce in tow.

"They were just coming back," she told her mother, as she sank into her seat and reached for a biscuit. "Daddy said he smelled the biscuits and they drew him with—— What was it you said they drew you with, Daddy?"

"Irresistible force?" asked Mr. Danvers, as he greeted the girls and took his seat at the head of the table. "Now, if they only taste as they smell ——" He smiled at his wife across the table and she handed him a plate full of the golden brown biscuits.

"Who owns the dog?" asked Laura boyishly, as Bruce sat down gravely at Mrs. Danvers' side, looking up at her adoringly.

"Oh, please, excuse me; I forgot to introduce him," cried Mrs. Danvers, dimpling and laying her hand lightly on the dog's head. "This is Robert Bruce, and he's a thoroughbred and belongs to Uncle Tom, and lives over at the lighthouse."

"The lighthouse," repeated Billie eagerly, then added as though she were thinking aloud: "Oh, but I'm crazy to see it."

"Are you?" asked Connie's mother, looking surprised at Billie's eagerness, for the lighthouse was an old story to her. "Connie can take you over there to-day if you would like to go."

"Oh, won't that be lovely!" cried Vi. "I've always wanted to see inside a real lighthouse.

I want to know all about the lights and everything. When can we go, Mrs. Danvers?"

"Any time you like," answered Mrs. Danvers, hear heart warming to their girlish enthusiasm. She was falling in love with Connie's friends more and more every minute. "Uncle Tom receives visitors at all hours of the day."

"And he has lots of 'em," added Connie, nodding over her coffee cup. "All the children and the men love him. He can tell so many stories, you know——"

"And fish stories too, I reckon," put in Connie's mother laughingly. "You know you can never really depend upon a sailor's telling the truth."

Good as the breakfast was, the girls found themselves hurrying through it, so eager were they to see the lighthouse and Uncle Tom. They took Bruce with them at Mrs. Danvers' request, for she was going to be very busy and the big dog did have a habit of getting in the way.

As the girls swung along the boardwalk they had a wild desire to shout with the sheer joy of living. Everything looked so different by daylight. It was not half so thrilling and mysterious, but it was much more beautiful.

The ocean was calm, for there was almost no wind. The water gleamed and sparkled in the brilliant sunshine, and the beach was almost too dazzlingly white to look upon.

In the distance rose the irregular outline of the mainland, but on all other sides there was nothing but an illimitable stretch of long, graceful, rolling combers.

As the girls came out upon the Point, there, before them, rose the lighthouse tower, robbed of the mystery it had worn the night before, yet wearing a quaint, romantic dignity all its own.

"Connie," said Billie happily, "I'm sure this is the most wonderful place in the world."

CHAPTER XVIII

UNCLE TOM

Uncle Tom was undeniably glad to see them. He was sitting in the little room at the base of the tower which was his living room, smoking a great corn-cob pipe and idly turning over the pages of a book.

But as Connie entered and ran to him with a joyful cry, he put the pipe down carefully, flung the book on the floor and caught the girl in a bear's hug.

"Well, well!" he cried, his great voice filling the room like thunder, "here's my little girl come back to me again. I was beginning to think you'd deserted your uncle in his old age, Connie, lass. When did you get back? And who are these other very pretty young ladies you have with you?"

"They are my chums and the nicest girls in all the world," said Connie, turning to them gayly. "You must have known they were coming, Uncle Tom. Mother said she told you."

"Yes, yes, so she did," said Uncle Tom in the same hearty tones that seemed to fill the little

room and—the girls could almost have sworn to it—make it tremble. "But my memory is getting worse and worse, Connie, lass," he added, with a doleful shake of the head that was belied by the merry twinkle in his eyes. "Let me see now, what was it their names were?"

Then laughingly Connie introduced the girls and Uncle Tom had some funny personal little thing to say to each one of them so that by the time the introductions were over they were all laughing merrily and feeling very well acquainted.

"I suppose you will be wanting to see the tower," said Uncle Tom, after he had shown them all around the quaint little room and introduced them to some of his treasures—queer racks and shells and pebbles that he had picked up in his wanderings. "Everybody always wants to climb the tower, and it's mighty hard on a poor old fellow with a weak back, let me tell you." And again the doleful shake of the head was belied by the twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh, we're in no hurry, please," put in Billie, turning from one of the small-paned, outward-opening windows that looked straight out upon the ocean. "I think this is the darlingest room I ever saw. I could spend days and days just looking around here."

Connie's Uncle Tom stood six feet two in his stocking feet and was broad in proportion. He

had a shock of reddish brown hair that was becoming slightly streaked with gray, but his face was clean shaven. His features were rugged, rather than handsome, but his eyes were large and red-brown to match his hair and with an everlasting humor in them that made everybody love him who knew him.

And now he stood looking down at Billie's pretty, eager face, and, though his face was grave, his eyes were laughing as usual.

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "I do. But then, I have to."

"I should think you'd want to," Billie shot back. "Why, I am sure I would just love to live here myself——"

"No, you wouldn't," Uncle Tom interrupted, taking up his pipe and puffing at it thoughtfully. "It's mighty nice in the day time, I'll admit. Then it's a mighty pretty, homey place. But at night, especially on a stormy night, it's different. The wind wails round here like a tortured ghost, the waves beat upon the rock foundation of the tower like savage beasts trying to tear it apart, and the tower itself seems to quiver and tremble. And you start to wonder——" the girls had gathered closer to him, for his voice was grave and his eyes had stopped laughing—"about the ships away out there in the fury of the storm, some of them crippled, distressed, sinking perhaps. And you get to think-

ing about the men and women, and little children maybe, on board and wondering how many will be alive when the storm dies down. I tell you it grips you by the throat, it makes your eyes ache with pity, and you curse the storm that's bringing disaster along with it."

His hands were clenched, his face was hard and stern, and the girls felt thrilled, stirred, as they had never been before. But suddenly he jumped to his feet, went over to the window and stood there looking out for a moment. And when he came back he was smiling so naturally that the girls caught themselves wondering if they had not dreamed what had gone before.

"I didn't mean to give you a lecture," he told them gayly. And with strange reluctance they shook off the spell and smiled with him. "Come on, let's take a look at the tower, and then I'll give you some clam chowder. Would you like some clam chowder?"

They were too fresh from breakfast to be wildly enthusiastic even over clam chowder just then, but they knew the time would come soon when they would be hungry again, so they assented happily and followed the broad back of Uncle Tom up the winding tower steps.

They exclaimed over the tower room, and the wonderful revolving light, but the thing that

charmed them most was the platform that completely encircled the tower.

They reached the platform through a small door, and as the girls stepped out upon it they felt almost as if they were stepping out into space.

The water seemed unbelievably far away, farther a good deal than it actually was, and Billie did not dare look down very long for fear of becoming dizzy.

It was almost half an hour before Uncle Tom finally succeeded in luring them away from the platform, and then the whole crowd of girls went reluctantly.

They went downstairs with Uncle Tom and listened to his yarns, with Bruce curled happily up at his master's feet, until the thought of the clam chowder he had promised them became insistent and Connie asked him pointblank whether he had forgotten all about it.

Uncle Tom indignantly denied the latter imputation, and set about preparing the chowder immediately, the girls offering eager but inexperienced help. Bruce tried to help, too, but only succeeded, as usual, in getting himself in the way.

And after that came bliss! The girls succeeded in devouring a huge pot of delicious chowder—it was better than that they had had the night before, because it was freshly made—and it was after three o'clock before they finally tore themselves from the

lighthouse and Uncle Tom and started for the Danvers' bungalow.

"Come again and come often," he called after them in his megaphone voice, one hand stroking Bruce's beautiful head as the big dog stood beside him.

"We will," they answered happily.

"Especially if you give us clam chowder every time," Billie laughed back at him over her shoulder. "Good-bye, Bruce." She turned once more before they lost sight of the lighthouse keeper, and there he was, towering in the doorway, his dog at his side, smoking his corn cob pipe and gazing thoughtfully out to sea.

"I don't wonder you love him, Connie," she said, shading her eyes with her hand, for the brilliant sunshine made her blink. "I think he's wonderful. He's like—like—somebody out of a book."

"Poor Teddy," said Laura, with a wicked side glance at her chum. "I guess he'd better hurry up, if he's coming."

Billie tried hard to think of something crushing to say in reply, but before she could speak Connie gave an excited little skip that very nearly landed her in the sand a couple of feet below the boardwalk.

"Oh, when do you suppose the boys will get here?" she asked eagerly. "I'm just crazy to go out in that motor boat of Paul's."

"Yes, to have the boys come will be all we need to make us perfectly happy," declared Vi.

"Well, they ought to be along in a few days now," said Billie. Then she suddenly caught Connie's arm and pointed out toward the water's edge.

"Look!" she cried. "There are some people in swimming."

"Why, of course," said Connie. "We can go in swimming, too, to-morrow if we want to. Maybe Uncle Tom will come along. I always feel safer with him, he's such a wonderful swimmer."

"Oh, I hope so," said Vi, adding plaintively: "I only wish to-morrow wasn't such a long way off," and she sighed.

The girls walked along in silence for a few minutes. Then Billie spoke as if she were thinking aloud.

"I wonder," she said, "what your Uncle Tom ——"

"You'd better call him *your* Uncle Tom," said Connie, with a laugh, "because he's already adopted you."

"All right," agreed Billie. "I wonder what made Uncle Tom speak the way he did about storms and wrecks and—and—things——"

"Why, since he's a sailor," said Laura, "I suppose he's been in all sorts of wrecks, and of course he thinks about them most in a storm."

"No," said Connie gravely. "No, that isn't it.

You see," she lowered her voice a little and spoke slowly, "Uncle Tom lost somebody in a wreck once. She was a very lovely girl, it is said, and Uncle Tom was engaged to marry her."

The girls' young faces were very sober as they gazed at Connie.

"Oh," said Billie softly. "Now I see. Poor, poor Uncle Tom!"

CHAPTER XIX

PAUL'S MOTOR BOAT

THE days flew by on wings and the girls were surprised to wake one morning to find that they had been at Lighthouse Island over a week.

They had been bathing and boating and swimming till they were tanned a beautiful brown, the color not being confined to their faces, but covering their arms and hands as well.

What with the exercise and Mrs. Danvers' wonderful cooking, they had gained flesh so fast that they had begun to wonder a little anxiously if they were "bound for the freak show."

"Why, it's positively dreadful!" Laura declared one morning, feeling ruefully of her waistline which she was quite certain had expanded at least two inches. "I've simply got to stop eating, or something."

"Stop eating!" echoed Billie, taking up a handful of sand and letting it sift slowly through her fingers. "Well, maybe you can do it, Laura dear, but I certainly can't—not with Connie's mother doing the cooking."

"I don't intend to try, no matter how fat I get," declared Vi.

It was right after breakfast, and the girls had jumped into their bathing suits, as they did at almost the same time every morning, and were waiting impatiently for the hour to pass that Mrs. Danvers' had insisted must pass before they went in swimming after breakfast.

"Mother said she might come down this morning and go in with us," said Connie, her eyes fixed dreamily on the horizon. Then suddenly she sat up straight and stared.

"What's the matter?" asked Billie. "Seeing ghosts or something?"

"No. But look!" Connie clutched at her arm. "Isn't that a motor boat?"

"That" was a tiny spot that grew bigger as they looked and seemed to be headed in their direction.

"It's a boat of some sort, I think," said Vi. "But you can't tell whether it's a motor boat or some other kind of a craft."

"Of course you can," Laura broke in excitedly. "It's got to be a motor boat because there aren't any sails or anything. It is! It is! Oh, girls! could it be——"

"The boys?" finished Billie, shading her eyes with her hand and gazing eagerly out toward the spec that was growing larger every minute. "Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful?"

"But we're not a bit sure it's the boys," Connie reminded her. "Lots of motor boats come here in the summer."

"Oh, stop being a kill-joy," Laura commanded, giving her a little shake. "I just feel it in my bones that the boys are in that boat. Where will they land, Connie?"

"At the dock, of course," Connie answered, in a tone which said very plainly: "You ought to have known that without asking."

"Well, let's run around there then," cried Billie, her cheeks red with excitement. "They won't know what to do if nobody's there to meet them."

As always with Billie, to think a thing was to do it, and before the girls had a chance to say anything she was off, fleet-footed, down the sand in the direction of the dock.

The girls stared for a minute, then Laura started in pursuit.

"Come on," she cried. "She's crazy, of course, but we've got to follow her, I suppose."

Billie had almost reached the dock before they caught up with her. Then Laura reached out a hand and jerked her to stop.

"Billie," she gasped, "be sensible for just a minute, please. Suppose it isn't the boys? Then we won't want to be waiting around as though we wanted somebody to speak to us!"

"Well, but I'm sure it is the boys. You said

so yourself," retorted Billie impatiently, her eyes fixed on the mysterious spot dancing and bobbing on the glistening water. "And they certainly won't know what to do if there isn't a soul here to meet them."

"But we don't want to meet them in our bathing suits," said Vi, who, with Connie, had just come pantingly up. "It wouldn't be just proper, would it?"

Billie looked at her doubtfully a moment, then reluctantly shook her head.

"No, I don't suppose it would," she admitted, adding with a stamp of her foot: "But I did want to be here to meet them."

"Well, we can be, if we rush," broke in Connie. "The boat won't reach the dock for fifteen or twenty minutes anyway, because it's still a long way off. We may be able to throw some clothes on and be back by that time."

"'Throw' is right," Laura said skeptically, but Billie was already racing off again in the direction of the cottage. With a helpless little laugh, the girls followed.

The boys would have declared it could not be done. But the girls proved that it could. They were panting when they reached the house, stopped just long enough to explain to the surprised Mrs. Danvers and then scurried upstairs, and with eager

fingers tore off their bathing suits and substituted their ordinary clothes.

"It's good we didn't go in bathing and get our hair all wet," Vi panted, but Laura put a hand over her mouth.

"Stop talking," she commanded. "You need your breath!"

As a matter of fact, they were pretty much out of the last-named article when they reached the dock again. But the great thing was that they had succeeded in getting there before whoever was in that motor boat made a landing.

"Suppose after all this it isn't the boys?" panted Laura, and Connie gave her a funny glance.

"Kill-joy," she jeered, paying her back.

Laura was about to retort, but Billie interrupted with a chuckle.

"Stop fighting, girls," she commanded, "and tell me something. Is my hair on straight?"

"No, it's too much over one eye," replied Connie in the same tone.

Then Vi claimed their attention.

"Look!" she cried. "They are coming around the other side of the dock. Oh, isn't that a perfectly beautiful boat?"

It was, but the girls were just then too much interested in finding out who was in the boat to pay very much attention to its beauty. The graceful craft swung around toward them, the motor

was shut off, and the boat glided easily in to the dock.

The girls were standing a little way back, so as not to appear too curious, and that was the reason why the boys saw them before they saw the newcomers.

There was a whoop from the deck of the motor boat, a shout of, "Say, fellows, look who's here!" and the next moment three sportily clad young figures leaped out on the dock and made a dash for the girls, leaving the fourth member of their party protesting vigorously.

The fourth member was none other than Paul Martinson, and, being the owner and captain of the handsome motor boat, he had no intention of following the other boys and leaving his craft to wander out to sea.

So he told the boys what he thought of them, which did not do a particle of good since they did not hear a word he said, and remained in the boat while he held on to the dock with one hand.

Meanwhile Chet had hugged his sister and Teddy had hugged his sister and Ferd had declared longingly that he wished he had a sister to hug, it made him feel lonesome, and there was laughter and noise and confusion generally.

It was Connie who reminded them of poor Paul grumbling away all by himself in his boat, and the

boys ran penitently over to him while the girls danced after them joyfully.

"Oh, what a splendid boat!"

"Isn't she a beauty!"

"What good times you must have in her."

It was really an unusually handsome craft, and it was little wonder that Paul regarded it with pride. He invited the girls on board, and they went into raptures enough over it to satisfy even him.

It was a good fifty feet in length and had a cabin in which one could stand up if one were not very tall. There were bunks running along both sides of the cabin that looked like leather-cushioned divans in the daytime and could be turned into the most comfortable of beds at night.

There was a galley "for'ard," too, where the boys cooked their rather sketchy meals, and into this the girls poked eagerly curious heads.

"Oh, it's all just the completest thing I've ever seen!" cried Billie, clapping her hands in delight while Paul looked at her happily. "Those cunning curtains at the window and—everything!"

"My mother did that," Paul admitted sheepishly, as he followed the girls out on the deck. "And I didn't like to take them down."

"Well, I should say you wouldn't take them down!" said Connie indignantly. "The idea!

Don't you dream of it! Why, they are just what make the cabin!"

"But isn't this some deck! Did your mother do this too, Paul?" asked Laura, her eyes traveling admiringly from the pretty wicker lounging chairs to the gayly striped awning and brilliant deck rail that shown like gold in the dazzling sun. "Why, Paul, I never knew a motor boat could be so pretty and comfy."

"Say, but you ought to see her go!" put in Chet eagerly. "She's as fast a little boat as she is pretty. Oh, she's great!"

"Yes, it almost makes me wish I had done some studying at school," said Ferd Stowing, rubbing his head ruefully. "Maybe if I had my dad would have given me an aeroplane or something."

After they had fastened the boat securely to the dock so that there was no danger of its floating off they turned reluctantly away from the dock and started off toward the Danvers' cottage.

Then the girls tried to tell the boys all that had happened since they had last met and the boys tried to do the same, the result being hopeless confusion and perfect happiness.

"Say, make believe that beach doesn't look good!" exclaimed Teddy to Billie, for they had fallen a little behind the rest. "And the good old ocean—say, what a day for a swim!"

"That's just what we were going to do when we

saw you coming," Billie confided, thinking how exceedingly handsome he looked in his white trousers and dark coat. Then she told him of the wild scramble they had had to get dressed, and she looked so pretty in the telling of it that he did not hear much of what she was saying to him for looking at her.

"But what made you so sure it was us?" asked Teddy ungrammatically.

Billie chuckled and gave a little skip of pure happiness.

"Laura said she felt it in her bones," she said.

CHAPTER XX

OUT OF THE FOG

THAT afternoon the boys and girls went in swimming and that evening Connie's mother treated them all to a substantial dinner such as only she knew how to cook.

And the way it disappeared before those ravenous girls and boys made even Mr. Danvers hold up his hands in consternation. But Connie's mother laughed happily, pressed them to eat everything up, "for it would only spoil," and looked more than ever like Connie's older sister.

That night the boys were put up in a spare room which contained one bed and two cots which Connie's mother always kept stowed away for emergencies. For the cottage on Lighthouse Island was a popular place with Mrs. Danvers' relatives and friends, and she often had unexpected company.

They went out on the porch a little while after supper, and the boys were at their funniest and kept the girls in a continual gale of merriment.

The time passed so quickly that before they knew

it eleven o'clock chimed out from the hall inside and in consternation Connie's mother hurried them all off to bed.

"To-morrow is another day," she added with a little smile.

As they started up the stairs Teddy looked down at Billie and said boyishly:

"Say, Billie, you've got *some* sunburn, haven't you? You're—you're mighty pretty."

Then Teddy blushed and Billie blushed, and Billie hoped with all her heart that Laura had not heard it.

Laura had not, for she was talking and laughing with Paul Martinson and Connie. And so Billie, running ahead and reaching her room first, turned on the light and stepped over to the mirror.

Was that Billie, she wondered, who gazed back at her from the mirror? For this girl was surely prettier than Billie ever had been. Her eyes were shining, her cheeks were flushed under their tan, and her hair, a little tumbled by the breeze from the sea, made an unexpectedly pretty frame for a very lovely face.

The next day the girls insisted that the boys take them out in their motor boat. The boys protested a little, for the sun was acting rather queerly —going under a cloud and staying there sometimes for half an hour on a stretch.

"I don't know," said Paul, a doubtful eye on the

sky. "It isn't what you could call a real clear day, girls, and I don't want to take any chances with you."

"Oh, we're not afraid, if you're not," sang out Laura teasingly, and he turned round upon her with a scowl.

"I'm not afraid for myself, and I think probably you know that. Just the same——"

"Oh, but here's the sun!" called Vi suddenly, as the sun burst forth from the cloud and showered a golden glory over everything. "It's going to be a beautiful day—just beautiful."

So it was settled, and amid great fun and laughter they picked up the lunch that Connie's mother prepared for them and started happily off, humming as they went.

As they clambered aboard *The Shelling*—Paul had named his craft after Captain Shelling, the master of Boxton Military Academy,—the sun went under a cloud again, and this cloud was bigger and blacker than any that had swallowed it before. But Laura's taunt still rang in Paul's ears, and he said nothing.

In a little while there was no need for words. The girls began to see for themselves that Paul had been right and that it would have been far better if they had waited till a really clear day.

They had put some distance between them and

the mainland when the sun went under a cloud for good, and a cool little breeze began to rise.

This had been going on for some time before they even realized it, they were having such fun. Then it was Connie who spoke.

Doesn't it look a little—a little—threatening, Paul?" she asked timidly. "Do you suppose it is going to rain?"

"No, I don't think it's going to rain," Paul answered, his hands on the wheel, his eyes rather anxiously fixed on the water ahead. "But I do think we're going to have one of those sudden heavy mists that come off the coast here. Dad said to look out for them, because they're thick enough to cut, and if you get caught in one you can't see your hand before your face."

The girls were sober enough now as they looked at each other.

"But what makes you think we're going to have one, Paul?" asked Laura humbly.

"Because the air is so still and muggy," Paul answered, then added with a wave of his hand out over the water: "Look—do you see that?"

"That" was a faint, misty cloudlike vapor hanging so low that it seemed almost to touch the water. And suddenly the girls were conscious that their hair was wet and also their hands and their clothes.

"Goodness, we must be in it now!" said Vi look-

ing wonderingly down at her damp skirt. "Only it's so light you can't see it."

"I'm afraid it won't be light very long," said Paul grimly, as he swung *The Shelling* around and headed back the way they had come.

"What are you going to do?" asked Laura, still more humbly, for she now was beginning to think that she was to blame for the fix they were in—if indeed it were a fix.

"I'm going to get back to land as soon as I can," Paul answered her. "Before this fog closes down on us."

"What would happen, Paul?" asked Billie softly. "I mean if it should close down on us."

"We'd be lost," said Paul shortly, for by this time he was more than anxious. He was worried.

"Lost!" they repeated, and looked at each other wide-eyed.

"Well, you needn't look as if that was the end of the world," said Teddy, trying to speak lightly. "All we would have to do would be to keep on drifting around till the fog lifted. It's simple."

"Yes, it's simple all right," said Chet gloomily. "If we don't run into anything."

"Run into anything!" gasped Connie, while the other girls just stared. "Oh, Paul, is there really any danger of that?"

"Of course," said Paul impatiently, noticing that the fog was growing thicker and blacker every

moment. "There's always danger of running into something when you get yourself lost in a fog. And it's the little boat that gets the worst of it," he added gloomily.

"Say, can't you try being cheerful for a change?" cried Teddy indignantly, for he had noticed how white Billie was getting and was trying his best to think of something to say that would make her laugh. "There's no use of singing a funeral song yet, you know."

"No, and there's no use in starting a dance, either," retorted Paul, wondering how much longer he would be able to keep his course. "We're in a mighty bad fix, and no harm can be done by everybody knowing it. I can't possibly get back to the island—or the mainland either—before this fog settles down upon us."

It took a minute or two for this to sink in. There was no doubt about it. He was telling them that in a few minutes they would be lost in this horrible fog. And that might mean—they shivered and turned dismayed faces to each other.

"I—oh, I'm awfully sorry," wailed Laura. "If I hadn't said what I did to Paul we might never have come."

"Nonsense! that had nothing to do with it," said Billie, puttting a loyal arm about her chum. "We would have come just the same."

Then followed a waking nightmare for the boys

and girls. In a few moments the fog settled down upon them in a thick impenetrable veil, so dense that, as Paul had said, you could almost have cut it.

It became impossible for Paul to steer, and all there was to do was to sit still and wait and hope for the best. Fog horns were sounding all about, some seeming so close that the girls fully expected to see some great shape loom up through the mist, bearing down upon them.

For a long time nobody spoke—they were too busy listening to the weird moanings of the fog horns and wondering how they could have escaped a collision so long. For a while Paul had kept the engine running in the hope that he might be able to keep to his course and eventually get to Lighthouse Island. But he had decided that this only made a collision more likely, and so had shut it off. And now they had been floating for what seemed hours to the miserable boys and girls.

It was Connie who finally broke the silence.

"Oh, dear," she said, apropos of nothing at all, "now I suppose we'll have to die and never solve our mystery after all." She sighed plaintively, and the girls had a wild desire to shout with laughter and cry at the same time.

"Goodness," said Laura hysterically, "if we've got to die who cares about mysteries anyway?"

The boys, who had been peering ahead into the

heavy unfriendly fog, looked at the girls in surprise.

"What do you mean—mystery?" Ferd asked.

Before the girls could answer a sharp cry from Paul jerked their eyes back to him.

"Look!" he cried, one hand on the wheel and the other pointing excitedly before them to a dark something which loomed suddenly out of the mist. "There! To starboard. We'll bump it sure!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BOYS ARE INTERESTED

For a moment the girls were too terrified to speak. And the next moment they could not have spoken if they had wanted to, for *The Shelling* collided so suddenly with whatever it was that had risen out of the mist that they had all they could do to keep from being thrown to the deck.

Then Paul gave a cry of joy and sprang wildly to the side of the boat.

"Say, how's this for luck, fellows?" he cried. "I thought it was another boat and that we were bound for Davy Jones' locker sure, and here it's the dock instead. Say, talk about luck! I'll say it's grand!"

"The dock!" the others echoed wonderingly. The sudden relief was so great that they were feeling rather dazed.

"You mean it's our dock—Lighthouse Island?" Connie asked stupidly, and Paul's answer was impatient.

"I guess it is—looks like it," he said. "But then it doesn't matter much what dock it is as long as

it's *a* dock. What do you people say to going ashore?"

What they said was soon shown by the eagerness with which they scrambled on to the dock. And when they found that it was really Lighthouse Island dock their thankfulness was mixed with awe.

"Why, it's a miracle!" said Vi, staring wide-eyed about her.

"That's just about what it looks like," agreed Chet soberly.

"A miracle!" exclaimed Ferd derisively. "It's just that the wind and the tide happened to be going in the right way, that's all."

"Well, it's a miracle that the wind and the tide did happen to be going the right way," retorted Laura.

"Yes, and it's another miracle," said Billie softly, "that even with the wind and the tide going the right way we didn't run into something before we got here."

"I guess we did come pretty close to it," said Teddy soberly, staring out into the heavy mist that still showed no sign of lifting. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I do know that I'm mighty glad to be on the good old ground again. It beats the water, just now."

"You bet," said Paul fervently, as he made his boat fast to the dock. "It would have been a hot

note if I'd had to lose my boat that way after working all year to earn it."

The girls and boys stared at him in surprise for a moment. Then they laughed, and the laughter broke the tension that they had been under and made them feel more natural.

"Never mind us as long as you saved your boat," said Ferd with a chuckle. "Come on, folks. It's mighty damp out here. I'll be glad when we can get under cover and dry out a bit. Gee, but I'll say I'm some wet."

"And Mother will be just worried to death," cried Connie penitently, for this was the very first minute she had given her mother a thought. "Oh, let's hurry."

They were starting off almost at a run when Billie called to them.

"Do you know we forgot something?" she asked. Then she pointed to the untouched lunch hamper which Mrs. Danvers had heaped high with good things. This was still standing close to the railing on the deck of *The Shelling* where the boys had put it when they climbed aboard.

"We forgot all about eating," she said in an incredulous voice. "Now I know we were scared."

"Say, what do you know about that?" asked Ferd weakly. "I'd have said it couldn't be done."

"And it must be away past lunch time, too," added Chet.

"Oh, gosh! why did you go and remind me I was starving?" groaned Teddy, and with a quick movement he leaped into the boat and caught up the basket. "Come on, who's first?" he cried.

But Billie stopped him by pressing a determined hand down on the lid.

"Not here," she begged. "We're all wet and uncomfortable, and we'll enjoy it ever so much more if we wait till we get to the house. Please, Teddy, now mind."

Teddy looked longingly at the basket, then at Billie, and gave in.

"All right," he said. "Only we'll have to walk fast!"

When they reached the cottage they found Connie's mother almost beside herself with anxiety and Connie's father doing his best to soothe her. So that when the young folks came in the door looking rather damp and bedraggled but safe, Mrs. Danvers cried out joyfully, ran to them, and hugged them one after another till she was completely and rapturously out of breath.

"You precious kiddies!" she cried, standing back and regarding them with shining eyes. "You will never know how horribly worried Dad and I have been. You poor children, why, you are soaked through! And," as her eyes fell on the basket, "you don't mean to tell me you haven't had any lunch. Oh dear, oh dear! Run into the library, the

lot of you. Daddy made a fire thinking if we ever did get you back you'd need some drying out—and you can be starting in on sandwiches while I make you some hot chocolate. Now run along—quick. And she disappeared into the kitchen while the young folks went on into the library.

Connie would have run after her mother to offer her help, but Mr. Danvers stopped her.

"I'll help Mother," he said. "You run along with the others, dear, and get warmed through. I don't want my little girl to catch cold. It might spoil your whole summer."

So Connie went on into the library and found that the boys had arranged the chairs in a semi-circle around the fire and were already opening the lunch basket.

Mrs. Danvers came in a few minutes later with the chocolate, and, oh, how that hot drink did taste! She demanded to know all about everything. They told her, speaking one at a time, two at a time, and all at once, till it was a wonder she could make any sense out of it at all. But when she and her husband did realize how terribly close the young folks had been to disaster they looked very sober and in their hearts thanked Providence for guiding them back to safety.

After they had eaten, the girls and boys felt very lazy and lingered in the pretty library before the open fire till the shadows began to fall.

"I hope we have half-way decent weather to start out on to-morrow," said Paul suddenly as he gazed out of the window.

"Oh! must you go *to-morrow?*" asked Billie, with such genuine regret that Teddy looked at her sideways.

"I'm afraid so," said Paul, also turning to look at her. "We've had a bully good time and we'd like to stay longer, but you see I promised Dad I'd pick him up a little farther along the coast and I can't do it unless we start to-morrow."

"But suppose it isn't a nice day?" Connie put in. "Will you go anyway?"

"Oh, of course, if it was really stormy we couldn't. We would have to wire Dad or something. But I think it's going to be clear to-morrow," he finished cheerfully.

Connie shook her head.

"I don't know about that," she said. "Uncle Tom says that a terribly heavy mist like this generally forecasts a storm, and a pretty bad storm, too."

"Well, we don't have to worry about that now, anyway," said Teddy, stretching his long legs out contentedly toward the fire. "Let's enjoy ourselves while we can. By the way," he added, turning to Billie, and Billie thought that Teddy was getting better looking every minute—or was it the firelight? "what did you girls mean by speaking of a mys-

tery? We haven't heard a word about any mystery."

"Of course you haven't. You don't suppose we tell you *everything,* do you?" said Laura, with a sisterly sniff.

"Well, but what did you mean?" asked Ferd, adding his voice to Teddy's while the other boys seemed interested.

The girls looked at one another and then at Billie.

"Shall we tell them?" asked Vi.

"I don't see why we shouldn't," Billie answered, her eyes on the fire. "Of course we don't know that there's any mystery about it. It only looks queer, that's all."

Then with the help of the girls she told the boys all about the man who lived in a hut in the woods and called himself Hugo Billings, and also about Miss Arbuckle and the album she had been so overjoyed to recover. The boys listened with an interest that fast changed to excitement.

"Well, I should say there was something queer about it!" Ferd Stowing broke out at last. "Especially about the man who lives in the woods and makes fern baskets. He's either crazy or he's a thief or something."

"Gee, I wish you had told us about it while we were there!" said Chet regretfully. "We might

have been able to find out something—landed him in jail maybe."

"Then I'm glad we didn't tell you," said Billie promptly.

"Why?" asked Chet, amazed.

"Because I felt awfully sorry for him," his sister answered softly. "And I'd rather help him than hurt him. I'd like to see him smile again."

"Smile?"

"Yes, for he looked so awfully downhearted."

CHAPTER XXII

THE FURY OF THE STORM

THE next day the boys went off again in spite of Mrs. Danvers' entreaties to stay another night or two until the weather showed definite signs of clearing up.

But the boys were decided—saying that since the mist had lifted they had really no excuse for staying longer, and as Paul was evidently very anxious to get to his father, Mrs. Danvers had nothing else to do but to give in.

"It's true, the fog has lifted," she admitted, gazing up anxiously at an overcast sky, "but after a calm like this we are sure to have a storm—how much of one it's hard to tell. Well, go on. But promise me to stay close to the mainland and to put in to shore if the weather man looks too threatening."

The boys promised and the girls waved to them until *The Shelling* was only a tiny speck on the water. Then they turned rather sadly back toward the Danvers' home.

"I feel as if somebody were dead or something,"

complained Vi, as they neared the bungalow. "I don't know what's the matter with me."

"It's the weather, I guess," said Billie, feeling low in spirits herself—a very unusual state for merry Billie. "We shall all feel better when the sun comes out."

"If it ever does," said Laura, gloomily.

"It's got to," said Vi.

Half way home they saw Uncle Tom hurrying toward them with Robert Bruce at his heels, and they wondered what the matter was.

"Hello!" he cried when he came within earshot. "I was just going to see your dad, Connie. The boys haven't gone yet, have they?"

And when Connie said that they had he looked so grave that the girls were frightened.

"Why, Uncle Tom, what's the matter?" asked Connie fearfully.

"Matter enough," said Uncle Tom, turning to scowl up at the overcast sky. "It's as much as those youngsters' lives are worth for them to set out to-day. Why, there's a storm on the way," and he fixed his eyes gravely on the girls, "such as this old Maine coast hasn't seen for years. Why, every captain who can read the signs is going to make straight for the nearest port, or if he is too far away to make port before the storm breaks, he's going to get down on his knees and pray the good Lord to make his old ship staunch enough to stand

the test. It will be upon us by night." His eyes sought the wild dreary waste of water and he spoke as though to himself. "Lord, how I dread to-night!"

"But, Uncle Tom, what can we do about the boys?" Connie shook his arm fiercely. "Why, if we have the kind of storm you say they may be drowned! Oh, can't we do something?"

Uncle Tom's eyes came back from the horizon and he shook his head slowly.

"I don't know that there's much we can do—now," he said. "If they have any sense they'll put in to port before the storm breaks. That is if they stick close in to shore."

"They said they would," Billie put in eagerly. "Oh, I hope they do!"

Uncle Tom nodded absently, for his mind seemed to be upon other things.

"Then they ought to be all right," he said, adding, while the lines deepened about his mouth: "But Heaven help the ships that can't put into shore to-night."

He turned slowly and strode away from them toward the lighthouse with Bruce still following worshipfully after him. He had forgotten they were there.

"Poor Uncle Tom!" said Connie, as they went slowly on toward the bungalow. "He always gets

so queer when there's a storm along the coast. I guess it makes him think of—her."

It was night, and the storm had burst in all its fury. The four girls and Connie's mother had gathered in the little front sitting room on the second floor.

Mr. Danvers had started a few minutes before to press the button that would flood the room with light, but Billie had begged him not to.

"I want to see the light in the tower," she had pleaded, adding softly: "Somehow I'm not quite so afraid for the ships out there when I see the light. Oh, listen to that wind!"

"I don't see how we can very well help it," said Vi, with a little shiver and cuddling up close to Billie on the window seat and slipping a hand into hers. "Oh—h!" and she clapped her hand to her ears as the wind rose to a wailing scream and the windows all over the house shook and rattled with the impact.

"I guess Uncle Tom was right," said Connie, from somewhere out of the darkness. "Dad says, too, that this is the worst summer storm we have had around these parts for years. Oh, I do hope the boys are safe somewhere on shore."

"I don't think we need worry about them," said Mr. Danvers. Or rather he started to say it, but at that moment the wind rose with insane fury,

bringing the rain with it in driving torrents that beat swishingly upon the sand and drove viciously against the windows.

He waited for a moment until the wind died down. Then he began again.

"The storm was a long time in coming," he said. "The boys had plenty of warning. Paul is very cautious, and I know he wouldn't go on in the face of such danger. But," and he turned toward the window again, "heaven help the ship that can't make port to-night."

"That's almost exactly what Uncle Tom said," remarked Connie, and then there was silence in the little room again while outside the storm raged and the light from the lighthouse tower sent its warning far out over the foam-crested waves.

The girls went to bed at last. Not because they expected to sleep, but because Connie's mother insisted.

"Poor Uncle Tom!" murmured Billie to herself as, in her little white nightie, she stood at the window looking out toward the lighthouse tower. "All alone out there. What was it he said? 'You think of the men and the women and the little children out there on the sinking ships, and you curse the storm that's bringing disaster along with it.' Poor, poor Uncle Tom! I wonder if he *is* thinking of—her."

And with a sigh she turned from the window and crept into bed beside Connie.

Toward morning the girls were awakened from an uneasy sleep by a strange white light flashed suddenly in their eyes. They stumbled out of bed, dazed by the suddenness with which they had been awakened and stared out into the black night.

"What was it?" gasped Billie. "Oh my, there it is again!"

"The searchlight," cried Connie, running over to the window, her eyes wide with horror. "Billie, that's the signal to the lifesavers. And there goes the siren," she groaned, clapping her hands over her ears as the moan of the siren rose wailingly into the night. "It's a wreck! Billie—oh—oh!"

"A wreck!" cried a voice behind them, and they turned to see Laura in the doorway with Vi peering fearfully over her shoulder. "Oh, girls, I was just dreaming——"

"Never mind what you were dreaming," cried Billie, beginning to pull on her clothes with trembling hands. "If it is a wreck, girls, we may be able to do something to help. Oh, where is my other stocking? Did any one see it? Never mind, here it is. Oh, hurry, girls; please, hurry."

Twice more while they were dressing the searchlight flashed round upon the island, filling their rooms with that weird white light, and the siren wailed incessantly its wild plea for help.

The girls were just pulling on their waterproof coats when Connie's mother, white and trembling, appeared in the doorway and stared with amazement at sight of them.

"I heard you talking, girls," she said, "and knew you were awake. I hoped you would sleep through it."

"Sleep through *that?*" asked Connie, as the siren rose to a shriek and then died off into a despairing moan. "Oh, Mother——"

"But what are you going to do, kiddies?" asked Mrs. Danvers, taking a step toward them. "The lifesavers will be coming soon—perhaps they are at work now—and they will do all that can be done. Why are you putting on your coats?"

"Oh, please, please don't make us stay at home," begged Billie, turning an earnest, troubled face to Connie's mother. "We may not be able to do anything to help, but we shall at least be there if we should be needed."

"Muddie, dear, we couldn't stay here, we just couldn't," added Connie, and with a little choked cry Mrs. Danvers turned away.

"You darling, darling kiddies," she cried. "Run along then if you must. Only," she stopped at the doorway to look earnestly back at them, "don't go any farther than the lighthouse until Dad and I come. We'll be along right away."

The girls ran down the stairs, and Connie opened

the front door with hands that fumbled nervously at the lock. As the door swung open the wind sprang at them like a living thing, taking their breath, making them stagger back into the hall.

"Th—that wind!" cried Laura, clenching her hands angrily. "I'd like to kill it! Come on, girls,"

Laura rushed out into the storm while the other girls followed, pulling the door shut behind them.

CHAPTER XXIII

FIGHTING FOR LIFE

Foot by foot they fought their way through the storm, conscious that other hurrying forms passed them from time to time. Their minds were fixed upon one thing. They must get to Uncle Tom. He would be able to tell them everything and perhaps let them know how they could help.

But they soon found that just getting to the lighthouse was a problem. Time and again they had to stop and turn their backs to the furious wind in order to catch enough breath to fight their way on.

"Look!" Connie had shouted once, pointing toward the east. "It must be almost morning. The sky is getting light."

As they hurried on they became more and more conscious that everybody seemed to be heading in the same direction—toward the lighthouse.

"The shoal!" gasped Connie in Billie's ear. "The wind must have driven some ship upon it, and in this gale——"

But she never finished the sentence, for at this minute they came out upon the Point where the

lighthouse stood and stopped dead at the scene that met their eyes.

The Point was black with people all gesticulating and pointing excitedly out toward a great shape which, looming grayly against the lifting blackness of the sky, staggered and swayed like a drunken thing in the grip of the gigantic foam-tipped waves.

"Oh," moaned Connie, "it's just as I thought! There's Uncle Tom. Come on, Billie." And she elbowed her way through the crowd to where Uncle Tom stood, his great height making him conspicuous among the other men, bawling out directions to the life-savers who were just making ready to launch their staunch little boats.

"Say, do you call this hurrying?" Uncle Tom was crying, his eyes traveling from the life-savers to the wreck and back again. "Don't you see she's just hanging on by her eyelashes? Another sea like that and you won't have a chance to save anybody. Good boys—that's the idea. Bend your backs, my lads. God help you—and them!" he added under his breath, his eyes on the laboring vessel.

"Uncle Tom!" cried Connie, tugging at his arm, "have they got a chance—those people out there? Have they?"

He glanced down at her for a moment, then his eyes sought the furious sea. He shook his head and his hands clenched tight at his sides.

"About one chance in a thousand," he muttered,

more to himself than to her. "The Evil One's in the sea to-night. I never saw the like of it—but once."

Then followed a struggle of human might against the will of the overpowering elements—a struggle that the girls never forgot. On, on, fought the gallant men in the staunch little boats. On, on toward the quivering giant that hung on the edge of destruction—her fate the fate of all the lives on board.

The storm that had beaten her on to the treacherous shoal was now doing its best to loosen her hold upon it. And that hold was the one slender thread that kept alive the hope of the passengers on board.

If the pounding waves once succeeded in pushing her back into the deeper water of the channel, nothing could save her. The great hole ripped in her side by the impact with the shoal would fill with water, and in five minutes there would be nothing left but the swirling water to mark the spot where she had been.

And the passengers! At the thought Billie cried out aloud and clenched her fists.

"Oh, oh, it can't be, it can't be! Those boats will never reach her in time. Oh, isn't there something somebody can do?" She turned pleadingly to Uncle Tom, but the look on his face startled her and she followed his set gaze out to sea.

"No, there isn't anything anybody can do—now," he said.

The storm had had its way at last. The elements had won. With a rending of mighty timbers the tortured ship slid backward off the shoal and into the deep waters of the channel.

"There she goes!"

"That's the last of that vessel!"

"I wonder if any of the folks on board got off safely."

"I couldn't see—the spray almost blinds a fellow."

Such were some of the remarks passed around as the ship on the shoal slipped slowly from view.

The girls clung to each other in an agony of suspense. Never had they dreamed that they would witness such a dreadful catastrophe as was now unfolding before them.

"Oh, Billie, this is dreadful!" groaned Laura, her face white with terror.

"I can hardly bear to look at it," whimpered Vi. "Just think of those poor people! I am sure every one of them will be drowned."

"Some of them must have gotten away in the small boats," answered Billie.

"I didn't see any of the boats," protested Connie. "But, of course, you can't see much of anything in such a storm as this."

"All we can do is to hope for the best," said Billie soberly.

"It's the worst thing I ever heard of," sighed Vi. "Why must we have such storms as this to tear such a big ship apart!"

A groan went up from the watchers, and many of them turned away. They could not see the end.

But the girls stared, fascinated, too dazed by the tragedy to turn their eyes away.

The life-savers, who had almost reached the ship, backed off a little, knowing that they could not help the passengers now and fearful of being drawn under by the suction themselves.

The great ship .hesitated a moment, trembled convulsively through all her frame, then her stern reared heavenward as though protesting against her fate, and slowly, majestically, she sank from view beneath the swirling waters.

Then the girls did turn their eyes away, and blindly, sobbingly, they stumbled back through the crowd toward the lighthouse.

"Oh, Billie, Billie, they will all be drowned!" sobbed Laura. The tears were running down her face unchecked. "Oh, what shall we do?"

"If they could only have held on just a few minutes more," said Vi, white-faced, "the life-savers would then have had a chance to have taken them off."

"They may save some of them anyway," said Billie, her voice sounding strange even to herself.

"The life-savers will pick up anybody who manages to get free of the wreck, you know."

"Yes; but Uncle Tom says that when a ship sinks like that it is hard to save anybody," said Connie, twisting her handkerchief into a damp little ball. "Girls," she said, turning upon them eyes that were wide with horror, "it makes me crazy to think of it. Out there, those people are drowning!"

"Oh, don't" cried Billie, pressing her hands to her ears. "I—I can't stand it. Girls, I've got to walk!" And Billie started off almost at a run along the beach, fighting her way against the wind.

The other girls followed her, and for a while they ran along, not knowing whither they were going, or caring. All they wanted was to forget the horror of the thing they had seen.

"What's that?"

Billie stepped back so quickly that she almost lost her footing in the slippery sand.

"What do you mean, Billie?"

"That!"

"Why, it—it looks like——"

"Come on. Let's find out." And Billie ran to the thing that looked like a large piece of driftwood washed up on the sand by the heavy sea.

And as she reached it she drew in her breath sharply and brushed a hand across her eyes to make sure she was not dreaming. On the thing that was not a piece of driftwood at all, but looked like a

sort of crudely and hastily constructed raft, were lashed three small, unconscious little forms.

"Girls, look!" she almost screamed above the shrill wind. "Do you see them, too?"

"Why—why, they are children!" cried Laura. "Oh, Billie, do you suppose they're alive?"

"I don't know," said Billie, dropping to her knees beside the three pitiful little figures. Two of them were girls, twins evidently, and the third was a smaller child, a boy. Something in their baby attitudes, perhaps their very helplessness, stung Billie to sudden action.

"Help me get them loose!" she cried to the other girls, who were still staring stupidly. "I don't know whether they're dead or not yet. But they will be if we don't hurry. Oh, girls, stop staring and help me!"

Then how they worked! The slippery wet rope that bound the little forms was knotted several times, and the girls thought they must scream with the nightmare of it before they got the last knot undone.

"There! At last!" cried Billie, flinging the rope aside and trying to lift one of the little girls. She found it surprisingly easy, for the child was pitifully thin. She staggered to her feet, holding the little form tight to her.

Laura and Vi each took one of the children and Connie offered to help whoever gave out first. Then

they started back to the lighthouse. Luckily for them, the wind was at their backs, or they never could have made the trip back.

When they reached the Point they found that most of the crowd had dispersed. Only a few stragglers remained to talk over the tragedy in awed and quiet whispers.

These stared as the girls with their strange burdens fought their way toward the door of the lighthouse. Some even started forward as though to offer assistance, but the girls did not notice them.

Through the window Billie could see Uncle Tom standing before his mantelpiece, head dropped wearily on his arm. Then Connie opened the door and they burst in upon him.

"Oh, Uncle Tom!" she gasped. "Please come here, quick!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THREE SMALL SURVIVORS

It did not take Uncle Tom very long, experienced as he was, to bring the three children back to consciousness. As it was, they had been more affected by the cold and the fright than anything else, for the raft, crude as it was, had kept them above the surface of the waves and saved their lives.

As the girls bent over them eagerly, helping Uncle Tom as well as they could, the faint color came back to the pinched little faces, and slowly the children opened their eyes.

"Oh, they are alive, bless 'em," cried Billie, jumping to her feet. But the quick action seemed to terrify the children, and they cried out in alarm. In a minute Billie was back on her knees beside them, looking at them wonderingly.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked, putting out her hand to the little boy, who shrank away from her and raised an arm before his eyes. "Why, honey, did you really think Billie would hurt a nice little boy like you?"

But all three children had begun to cry, and Billie looked helplessly at her chums.

Uncle Tom had spread a large rug on the floor and had laid the children on it while he worked over them. Up to this time he had been on his knees beside the girls, but now he got to his feet and looked down at them soberly.

"Somebody's been mistreating 'em," he said, his eyes on the three cowering, pathetic little figures. "Poor little mites—poor little mites! Found 'em on a sort of raft, you say? Washed up by the waves?"

The girls nodded, and Billie, putting a tender arm around the little fellow, succeeded in drawing him up close to her while Laura and Vi tried to do the same with the little girls. Connie was watching her Uncle Tom.

"H'm," said the latter, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Folks on the ship probably—drowned out there. Poor little waifs. Kind of up to us to take care of 'em, I reckon."

"Of course it is," cried Connie, jumping to her feet. "Uncle Tom, where did Mother and Daddy go?"

"On, toward the house," said Uncle Tom, nodding his head in the direction of the bungalow. "When they couldn't find you they got kind o' worried and thought you must have made tracks for home."

"Here they come now," cried Laura, for through the windows she had caught sight of Mr. and Mrs. Danvers hurrying along the walk toward the lighthouse.

"Oh, I'm glad," said Billie, hugging the little boy to her and smoothing his damp hair back from his forehead. The child had stopped crying and had snuggled close to Billie, lying very still like a little kitten who has found shelter and comfort in the midst of a wilderness. The soft little confiding warmth of him very suddenly made Billie want to cry. "Your mother will know what to do," she said to Connie.

"Mother always does," said Connie confidently, and a minute later opened the door to admit two very much wind-blown, exhausted and very anxious parents.

"Oh, kiddies, what a fright you gave us!" cried Connie's mother, looking very pale and tired as she leaned against the door post while Mr. Danvers patted her hand gently and tried not to look too much relieved. "Where did you go? Why, girls——" She stopped short in absolute amazement and bewilderment as she caught sight of Laura and Vi and Billie on the floor, each with a child clasped in her arms. "Where did you get them?"

She did not wait for an answer. She flew across the room and, dropping to her knees, gazed at the children who at this new intrusion had started away

from the girls and regarded her with wide, doubtful eyes.

"Why, you precious little scared babies, you!" she cried, pushing the girls away and gathering the children to her. "I don't know where you came from, but what you need is mothering. Where did they come from?" she asked, looking up at Uncle Tom.

"From out there," said Uncle Tom gravely, waving his hand toward the spot where the ship had gone down. Then he quickly told her and Mr. Danvers what the girls had told him. They did not interrupt. Only, when he had finished, Mrs. Danvers was crying and not trying to hide it.

"Oh, those poor, poor people!" she sobbed. "And these poor little frightened, miserable children all, all there is left. Oh, I'll never get over the horror of it. Never, never! John," she added, looking up at her husband with one of those quick changes of mood that the girls had learned to expect in her, "will you and Tom help me get the children home? They mustn't be left like this in dripping clothes. They'll catch their death of cold. What they need is a hot bath and something to eat, and then bed. Poor little sweethearts, they are just dropping for sleep."

So Uncle Tom took one of the little girls, Mr. Danvers another, and Connie's mother insisted upon carrying the little boy.

"Why, he's nothing at all to carry," she said, when her husband protested. "Poor child—he's only skin and bones."

So the strange procession started for the bungalow, the girls, tired out with nerve strain and excitement, bringing up the rear. But they did not know they were tired. The mystery of the three strange little waifs washed up to them by the sea had done a good deal to erase even the horror of the wreck.

"And we haven't the slightest idea in the world who they really are or whom they belong to," Connie was saying as they turned in at the walk. "It *is* a mystery, girls, a *real* mystery this time. And I don't know how we'll solve it."

But they forgot the mystery for the time being in the pleasure of seeing the waifs bathed and wrapped in warm things from the girls' wardrobes and fed as only Connie's mother could feed such children.

Gradually the fear died out of the children's eyes, and once the little boy even reached over timidly and put a soft, warm hand in Billie's.

"You darling," she choked, bending over to kiss the little hand. "You're not afraid of Billie now, are you?"

The little girls, who were twins and as like as two peas, were harder to win over. But by love and tenderness Connie's mother and the girls managed it at last.

And then eyes grew drowsy, tired little heads nodded, and Connie's mother, with a look at Mr. Danvers, who had been hovering in the background all the time, picked up one of the little girls and started for the stairs.

"I'm going to tuck them in bed," she said, speaking softly. "We can put them in our room John—in the big bed."

A few minutes later the girls stood in Mrs. Danvers' room, looking down at three little flushed faces, three tousled heads that belonged to three very sound-asleep little children.

Connie's mother tiptoed out of the room and motioned to the girls to follow, but they lingered for a minute.

"Aren't they lovely?" asked Connie, with a catch in her voice.

"They're beautiful," said Laura. "Especially the little boy."

"And they ate," said Vi softly, "as if they had been half starved. Poor little things—I wonder who they are?"

"Girls," said Billie gravely, "I suppose you will laugh at me when I tell you, but ever since I first saw them I have had a strange feeling——"

"Yes," they said impatiently, as she paused.

"That I have seen them somewhere before," she finished, looking at them earnestly. "And now, as they lie there I'm almost sure of it."

"Seen them before?" repeated Connie, forgetting in her astonishment to lower her voice, so that the little boy stirred restlessly. Billie drew them out into the hall.

"Come into our room," she said; and they followed her in wondering silence.

"I wish you would say that all over again, Billie," said Vi eagerly, when they had drawn their chairs up close to Billie. "You said you had seen them before?"

"No, I said I thought I had seen them before," said Billie, frowning with the effort to remember. "It seems foolish, I know——"

"But, Billie, if you feel like that you must have some reason for it," said Laura eagerly.

There followed a silence during which Billie frowned some more and the girls watched her eagerly. Then she disappointed them by suddenly jumping up and starting for the door.

"Well," she said, "I can't remember now. Maybe I will when I've stopped trying to. Come on, Connie, let's help your mother with the dishes."

But Billie did not find the answer for several days. Meanwhile they had received word from the boys that they had put into port the afternoon of the great storm and had not been able to go out again until a couple of days later. No news concerning the three waifs had come in.

The boys had received news of the wrecked ship,

of course, and were tremendously excited about it.

"You girls have all the luck, anyway," Chet wrote to Billie. "Just think—if we had stayed over a few hours we would have seen the wreck too."

Billie tore the letter up and flung it into the paper basket.

"Luck!" she had murmured, her face suddenly grown white as she gazed out over the water that was brilliantly peaceful once more in the afternoon sunlight. "He calls *that* luck!"

The boys had promised to return in a couple of weeks and give the girls a regular "ride in the motor boat." If it had not been for the waifs who had so strangely been entrusted to them, the girls would have looked forward more eagerly to the return of the boys.

As it was, they were too busy taking care of the sweet little girls and beautiful little boy and falling in love with them to think much of the boys one way or another except to be deeply thankful that they had escaped disaster in the storm.

And then, when Billie had nearly forgotten that strange impression she had had in the beginning of having seen the children before, suddenly she remembered.

It was one night after the girls had gone to bed. They had been laughing over some of the cunning things the children had been doing, and Laura had been wondering how they would go about finding

the relatives of the children—if they had any—when suddenly Billie sat up in bed with a look of astonishment on her face.

"Girls," she cried, "I know where I saw those children."

"Oh, where?" they cried, and then held their breath for her answer.

"In Miss Arbuckle's album!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE MYSTERY SOLVED

For a moment there was silence in the two rooms while the girls let this sink in. Then Laura and Vi jumped out of bed, and, running into Connie's room, fairly pounced upon Billie.

They were all so excited that for a moment they could not speak. And then they all spoke at once.

"Miss Arbuckle's album!"

"Billie, you must be crazy!"

"I never heard anything——"

"Billie, are you sure?"

These, and a dozen other wild questions like them fairly smothered poor Billie, and it was a long time before she could get a word in edgewise.

"Please keep still a minute," she cried at last. "You're making so much noise you'll wake the children."

"Goodness! who cares about the children?" cried Laura impatiently. "Billie, if you don't say something, I'll scream."

"Well, give me a chance then," retorted Billie.

"What did you mean by saying that you saw them in Miss Arbuckle's album?" asked Connie.

Billie looked at her soberly and then said very quietly. "Just that!"

"But, Billie, when did this happen?" cried Laura, fairly shaking her in her impatience. "For goodness sake, tell us everything."

"Why, I know!" Vi broke in excitedly. "Don't you remember what Billie said about Miss Arbuckle's crying over the pictures of three children in the album——"

"And said," Connie took up the tale eagerly, "that she had lost her dear ones, but didn't want to lose their pictures too? Oh, Billie, now it is a mystery!"

"But if you are sure these are the same children you saw in the album, Billie," said Laura, walking up and down the room excitedly, "you will have to do something about it."

"Of course," said Billie, her eyes shining. "I'll write to Miss Arbuckle and tell her all about it. Oh, girls, I can't wait to see her face when she sees them. I'm sure it will make her happy again."

They talked about Billie's remarkable discovery late into the night, until finally sheer weariness forced them to go to bed. But in the morning they were up with the first ray of sunlight.

They told Connie's mother and father about it at the breakfast table, and before they got through the

meal the two older people were almost as interested and excited as the girls.

As soon as she could get away Billie flew upstairs to write her letter, leaving the others still at the table. The children had already had their breakfast —for like all children they woke up with the birds— and were out playing on the front porch.

"Why, I never heard anything like it!" said Connie's mother to her equally astonished husband. "It seems like a fairy tale. But, oh, I do hope it is true —for the kiddies' sake and for that of that poor Miss Arbuckle."

Again and again Mrs. Danvers had tried to question the children about their parents and where they lived, but the little things had seemed to be thrown into such terror at the very first questions and had refused so absolutely to say a word that might lead to the discovery of their relatives that she had been forced to give up in despair. Just the very night before Mr. Danvers had decided to go over to the mainland and put an advertisement in all the leading papers.

"Although I rather dread to find their guardians," he had confided to his wife that night, as they had stood looking down at the sweet little sleeping faces. "I'm falling in love with them. It's like having Connie a baby all over again."

And Connie's mother had patted his arm fondly

and reached down to draw a cover up over one little bare arm.

"I feel that way too," she had said softly.

When Billie had finished her letter Mr. Danvers volunteered to take it over to the mainland for her and send it special delivery.

"You won't put the ad in the paper then, will you?" his wife asked as he started off.

"No," he said, stooping down to pat the little boy's dark head. "I'll give Billie a chance to clear up her mystery first." And with a smile at Billie he swung off down the walk while with quickened hearts the girls and Mrs. Danvers watched him go.

Suddenly the little fellow got up from the hollow in the sand where he and his sisters had been making sand pies and ran up to Billie, waving his shovel excitedly.

"Him goin' 'way?" he asked, pointing down the beach toward Mr. Danvers.

"Yes. But he's coming back," said Billie, catching the little fellow up and kissing his soft rosy cheek. Then she looked at the girls and her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, girls," she cried, "I don't see how I'm going to give him up!"

Then followed days of anxious waiting for the girls. Every night when the mail came in on the *Mary Ann* they were at the dock to meet it. But though they searched for a letter postmarked Mo-

lata with eager eyes, day after day went by and still there was no word from Miss Arbuckle.

This state of affairs continued for over a week until the girls had begun to give up in despair. And then one night it came—the letter they had been waiting for.

They did not wait to get home, but sat down on the edge of the dock while Billie read it aloud.

The letter was such a mixture of joy and hope and fear that sometimes the girls had hard work making anything out of it. However, this much was clear: Miss Arbuckle intended to leave Molata Friday night—and this was Friday night—and would probably be at Lighthouse Island Saturday morning. And to-morrow was Saturday!

"She says," Billie finished, her voice trembling with excitement, "that the reason she didn't write to us before was because she was out of town and didn't receive my letter for almost a week after it reached Three Towers Hall. She says——"

"Oh, who cares about that?" cried Laura impatiently. "The main thing is that she will be here to-morrow."

"Only a little over twelve hours to wait."

The girls did not sleep very well that night, and they were up and dressed and at the dock almost an hour before the steamer was due.

They were so nervous that they could not stand still, and it was just as well that the *Mary Ann* was

a little early that morning, or the dock would have been worn out completely, Connie declared.

"Oh, Billie, suppose she doesn't come?" whispered Vi as the boat slid into the dock. "Suppose——"

"No suppose about it," Billie whispered back joyfully. "Look, Vi! There she is."

"But who is the man with her?" cried Laura suddenly, as Miss Arbuckle waved to them from the upper deck and then started down the narrow winding stairway, followed by a tall, rather stoop-shouldered man who seemed to the girls to have something vaguely familiar about him.

"He may not be with her," Billie answered. But suddenly she gasped. Miss Arbuckle had stepped upon the dock with hands outstretched to the girls, and as the tall man followed her Billie got her first full look at his face.

It was Hugo Billings, the mysterious maker of fern baskets whom they had found in his hut in the woods!

As for the man, he seemed as much astonished as the girls, and he stood staring at them and they at him while Miss Arbuckle looked from one to the other in amazement.

"What's the matter?" she cried. "Hugo, have you met the girls before?"

"Why, why yes," stammered the man, a smile touching his lips.

"You see we were lost in the woods and he very kindly showed us the way out," said Billie, finding her voice at last.

"Oh," said Miss Arbuckle.

Then she introduced her companion to the girls as "my brother" and once more the girls thought they must be losing their minds. But this time Miss Arbuckle did not seem to notice their bewilderment, for her whole mind was on the object that had brought her here.

"The children?" she asked, her voice trembling with emotion. "Are they here?"

"They are at my house, Miss Arbuckle," said Connie, recovering from her bewilderment enough to realize that she was the hostess. "I suppose you're crazy to see them."

"Oh yes! Oh yes!" cried the teacher. Then, as Connie led the way on toward the cottage, she turned to Billie eagerly.

"Billie," she said, "are you sure you recognized my children? If I should be disappointed now I—I think it would kill me. Tell me, what do they look like?"

As Billie described the waifs Miss Arbuckle's face grew brighter and brighter and the man whom the girls had called Hugo Billings leaned forward eagerly.

"I guess there's no mistake this time, Mary," he said, and there was infinite relief in his tone.

When they reached the cottage the children were playing in the sand as usual, and the girls drew back, leaving Miss Arbuckle and her brother to go on alone.

Miss Arbuckle had grown very white, and she reached out a hand to her brother for support. Then she leaned forward and called very softly: "Davy. Davy, dear."

The children stopped playing and stared up at the visitors. But it was the little fellow who recognized them first.

"Mary! My Mary!" he cried in his baby voice, and ran as fast as his little legs could carry him straight into Miss Arbuckle's arms. Then the little girls ran to her, and Miss Arbuckle dropped down in the sand and hugged them and kissed them and cried over them.

"Oh, my children! My darling, darling children!" she cried over and over again, while the man stood looking down at them with such a look of utter happiness on his face that the girls turned away.

"Come on," whispered Billie, and they slipped past the two and into the house.

Connie's mother and father were in the library, and when the girls told them what had happened they hurried out to greet the newcomers, leaving the chums alone.

"Well, now," said Laura, sinking down on the

couch and looking up at them, "what do you think of that?"

"I'm so dazed, I don't know what to think of it," said Billie, adding, with a funny little laugh: "The only thing we do know is that everybody's happy."

"Talk about mysteries——" Connie was beginning when Connie's mother and Miss Arbuckle came in with the clamoring, excited children. And to say that Miss Arbuckle's face was radiant would not have been describing it at all.

"Oh girls, girls!" she cried, looking around at them, while her eyes filled with tears, "do you know what you've done for me—do you? But of course you don't," she answered herself, sitting down on the couch while the children climbed up and snuggled against her. "And that's what I want to tell you."

"Oh, but not now," protested Connie's mother. "I want to get you a cup of tea first."

"Oh, please let me tell the girls now. I want to," begged Miss Arbuckle, and Connie's mother gave in.

"You see," the teacher began while the girls gathered around eagerly, "only a few months ago Hugo—my brother—and I were very happy. That was before the dreadful thing happened that changed everything for us. I was nurse and governess," she hugged the children to her and they gazed up at her fondly, "to these children at the

same house where Hugo was head gardener. Our employers were very wealthy people, and, having too many social duties to care for their children, Hugo and I sort of took the place of their father and mother. Indeed we loved them as if they belonged to us."

She paused a moment, and the girls stirred impatiently.

"Then the terrible thing happened," she continued. "One night the children disappeared. I had put them to bed as usual, and in the morning when I went in to them they were gone."

"Oh!" cried the girls.

"But that wasn't enough—Hugo and I weren't sorrow-stricken enough," she went on, a trace of bitterness creeping into her voice. "But they—Mr. and Mrs. Beltz—must accuse us—us—of a plot to kidnap the children. They accused us openly, and Hugo and I, being afraid they had enough circumstantial evidence to convict us, innocent though we were, fled from the house.

"That's about all," she said, with a sigh. "Hugo built himself a little refuge in the woods and made fern baskets, selling enough to make him a scanty living, and I went as a teacher and house matron to Three Towers Hall. That is why," she turned to Billie, who was staring at her fascinated, "I was so desperate when I lost the album, and why," she

added, with a smile, "I acted so foolishly when you returned it."

"You weren't foolish," said Billie. "I think you were awfully brave. I understand everything now."

"But I don't—not quite," put in Connie's mother, her pretty forehead puckered thoughtfully. "Of course you didn't kidnap the children," turning to Miss Arbuckle, "but it is equally certain that somebody must have done it."

"Oh, but don't you see?" Connie broke in eagerly. "The kidnappers, whoever they were, must have gone down on the ship out there on the shoal."

"And they bound the children on that funny raft and set them adrift, probably thinking they would be able to get away themselves," added Vi eagerly.

"And then the ship went down before they could follow," said Billie, adding, as she turned earnestly to the teacher: "Oh, Miss Arbuckle, it was awful—that poor ship out there going down with all the people on board!"

"Yes, it must have been horrible. I read about it in the papers," nodded Miss Arbuckle soberly. Then a great light broke over her face as she looked down at the three children who were still not much more than babies. "But some good comes of almost everything. I have my precious children now, and I can take them back to their family and prove my innocence—and Hugo's. Oh I'm so happy—I'm so happy!"

"But won't you come back to Three Towers any more?" asked Laura, her face so long that Miss Arbuckle laughed delightedly.

"Yes, my dear," she said, a joyful light in her eyes that made her quite a different person. "Hugo will probably go back to his old position, but I—oh, I could not desert Three Towers now after all you girls have done for me."

Then Connie's mother had her way and whisked joyful Miss Arbuckle away upstairs to "take off her hat" while the children trailed after, leaving the girls alone.

Laura and Connie and Vi fairly hugged each other over the marvelous clearing up of their mystery, but Billie turned away and looked out of the window, while sudden tears stung her eyes.

She did not notice that the little boy whom Miss Arbuckle had called Davy stopped at the foot of the stairs and crept softly back to her, she did not know he was anywhere around, till a soft little hand was slipped into hers and a baby voice said plaintively:

"Me loves my Billie, too."

"You darling!" cried Billie, kneeling down and catching him close to her. "I suppose they will take you away now where you belong, honey, but don't ever forget your Billie."

And when the girls went over to her a few minutes later they were surprised to find that her eyes were wet.

"Why, Billie, you've been crying!" Laura exclaimed. "And you ought to be as happy as the rest of us."

"I am," said Billie, wiping her eyes hard. "Only I was thinking of little Davy."

"Well, don't, if it makes you cry and gets your nose all red," scolded Connie.

"Never mind, honey," said Vi, putting an arm about her. "We are all sorry to see the kiddies go, of course. But we can see them again some time if we want to."

"And just think," added Laura happily, "the boys are coming back next week. And that means Teddy, too," she added slyly.

"Yes, I'm glad he—*they* are coming," stammered Billie, and the others laughed at her confusion. Then suddenly she wiped away the last trace of her tears and her eyes began to shine, making her look like the Billie the girls knew and loved best. "We *will* have some good times when the boys come, girls. Why," as if making a surprising discovery, "our fun has just begun!"

And that Billie was speaking the truth and that there were more adventures in store for the boys and girls than even the girls dreamed of on that beautiful summer day, will be shown in the next volume of the series.

In the due course of time the three Beltz children were restored to their parents. It was learned that

they had been kidnapped by three men who had thought to make a large sum of money out of their scoundrelly game. But all three kidnappers had lost their lives in the wreck.

At first it was supposed that many had gone down in the foundering of the *Daniel Boley,* as the ship was named. But later on it was learned that three small boats had got away in safety and the survivors had been picked up by a vessel bound for Halifax. So the loss of life was, after all, small.

Mr. and Mrs. Beltz were heartily ashamed of having suspected Miss Arbuckle and her brother of wrong doing, and they offered both their positions back at increased salaries. Hugo returned to the Beltz estate, but not so his sister.

"I love the children very, very much," said Miss Arbuckle. "But I also love Three Towers Hall and the girls there. I shall remain at the school." And she did, much to the delight of Billie and her chums.

And now the sun shining brightly once more and happiness all around them, let us say good-bye to Billie and the other girls on Lighthouse Island.

THE END

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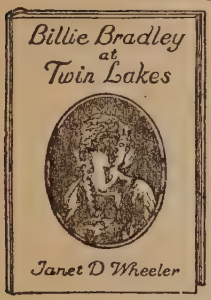

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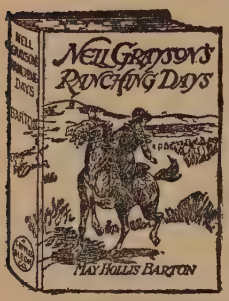

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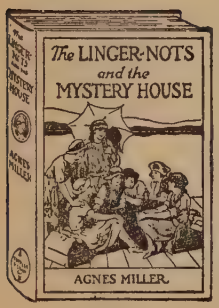

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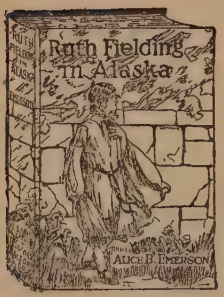

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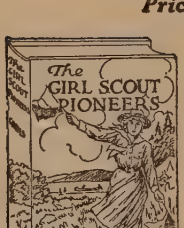

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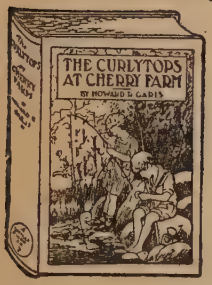

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